

RESEARCH BRIEFING

MOVING TO ADOPTION: A PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT



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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

This study was motivated by concerns that the traditional UK approach to moving children from foster care into adoptive families might not be the most suitable approach for some children and their foster and adoptive families.

Most adopted children are under 5 years when placed for adoption. They will often have lived in foster care for 18 months or longer before being placed with new parents. Typically, the move has taken place in 5 – 14 days, according to the age of the child. After the move, children may not see their foster carers again for 6 – 12 weeks and for some there is no further contact, although some adopters choose to remain in touch.

In some cases, these moves are distressing and abrupt for children and highly emotional for adopters and foster carers. Where moves to adoption are difficult and distressing, there may be links to poorer child outcomes and even disruption.

Professionals have expressed uncertainty about how to plan and support these moves in a more child focused way.

AIM OF THE PROJECT

The aim of this project was to develop and pilot a practice programme for professionals who are supporting children's moves to adoption. This practice programme would be informed by theory and research and would address the issues outlined above by promoting some changes in social work practice in this area. The feedback from the piloting of the practice programme would inform next steps in developing and disseminating the programme in order to achieve a more widespread impact on practice.

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

The first stage of the project included 20 individual telephone consultations with professionals, foster carers and adopters from across the UK who had offered to share their experiences and innovations regarding moving children to adoption.

In addition, two focus groups and a stakeholders' consultation group were established at the beginning of the project and members of these groups continued to provide feedback and to contribute to a 'findings and next steps' workshop at the end of the project.

The practice programme was developed between January and June 2017. It is designed to be used by adoption, fostering and children's social workers. It is underpinned by the Secure Base model <https://www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/the-secure-base-model>.

The practice programme provides a framework for thinking about a child's move to adoption. This suggests that the child should experience a gradual process of building trust in the adopters while at the same time being able to rely on the trusted foster carer for nurture and reassurance. After the child's move to the adoptive family, the foster carer's physical and psychological presence should decrease gradually as the child builds trust and confidence in their new family. In most cases there should be some consideration given to ongoing direct or indirect contact with the foster carer who has been an important figure in the child's life.

The practice programme is not prescriptive about the detail of this process. Rather, it suggests some key principles that should be held in mind when helping children to move. Within these principles, the programme promotes an individualised approach to planning each move, placing the child's needs at the centre, while also supporting the foster carers and the adopters.

Key principles for supporting children's moves to adoption

- Opportunities for the foster carers and adopters to build a positive relationship should be promoted at an early stage in the moving process, as this is helpful to the success of the move.
- The child and the adopters should be given opportunities to become familiar with each other through play and observation prior to adopters undertaking any caregiving tasks.
- All arrangements and timescales should focus on the needs of the child.
- The child's feelings about the move should be held in mind, and responded to sensitively.
- Some continuity of foster family relationships and environment will support the child in managing the loss of the foster family and building trust in the adoptive family.
- There should be flexibility in the planning, in consultation with the child, the families and the social workers, to allow for emerging circumstances and needs.

Two local authorities (Norfolk County Council and the London Borough of Southwark) agreed to work in partnership with the UEA team to pilot and review the practice programme. Both agencies were highly receptive to the project. One had already begun to think and work in line with the principles of the practice programme. For the other, this was a less familiar approach. Both authorities valued the supportive structure of the project, which provided opportunities to develop and reflect on their practice.

The agencies agreed to consider the practice programme in respect of each child moved to a new adoptive family between the beginning of July 2017 and the end of June 2018. The implementation of the programme was supported by the UEA research team in each agency through:

- an initial/launch training event for social workers in adoption, fostering and children's teams
- leaflets for foster carers and adopters explaining the key principles
- a more detailed handbook for social workers setting out relevant theory/rationale and providing ideas about how the principles could be applied in practice.
- 3 workshops held in each agency to review progress, discuss specific (anonymised) cases and troubleshoot implementation problems.

Approximately four weeks after each child's move, the UEA team sent an online feedback survey to the adoption social workers, fostering social workers, looked after children's social workers, foster carers and adopters of each child referred. Overall 76 responses were received providing additional feedback on the moves of the full sample of children.

KEY FINDINGS

Forty children were referred to the project. They ranged in age from 5 months to 6 years. There were five sibling groups. Twenty eight of the children were white British and twelve were from black or minority ethnic groups or mixed race.

When planning and supporting children's moves, the pilot agencies reported a wide range of practice whilst adhering to the key principles of the practice programme, outlined above. From these reports we were able to describe three key stages of the moving process (the UEA model) as set out below. In contrast to traditional practice, moves made using the pilot programme tended to extend the overlap between foster and adoptive families. This was primarily through allowing for more familiarisation before the move was made and more contact after the move, with the period of intensive contact usually completed in about two weeks, as before.

Stage 1: Getting to know each other

This stage refers to a period of time after the match between the adopters and the child has been identified and before the more intensive activity surrounding the child's move begins. This stage could last from between 1 week and 8 weeks. The aim was a gradual process of familiarisation in which the foster carers and the adopters, and similarly, the adopters and the child, could get to know each other and begin to build trust. The pilot agencies varied

in how much of this activity took place before and after the match was taken to the adoption panel for recommendation.

Helpful areas of practice at Stage 1:

- Meetings between foster carers and adopters, without the child present.
- Planned sessions for adopters to observe and play with the child (without caregiving tasks).
- Preparing the child for significant changes that will occur in the new family e.g. different foods, pets, sleeping arrangements etc.
- Professionals communicating carefully with the child, with the families and with each other.

I think what was particularly helpful (in making a positive move) was the first meetings between children and adopters with no pressure on adopters to do any caring tasks and for the children to develop a playful relationship first with adopters. (Adoption social worker).

Stage 2: Making the move

This stage typically involved a timescale of between 9 and 14 days, after which the child would officially move to the adopters' home ('the placement day'). It was an intensive period with the adopters and child having almost daily contact: the adopters initially spending time in the foster home and then the child and foster carer spending time in the adoptive home. The foster carers remained physically and psychologically available during this stage, but incrementally took more of a back seat, as the adopters gained confidence in their caregiving tasks and children gained confidence that the new parents could meet their needs.

Helpful areas of practice at Stage 2:

- Individualised plans, adjusted according to age, the nature of the child's attachment with the foster carer, the child's personality and previous history of change and loss.
- Flexible planning in line with changing needs and circumstances, with the child's needs at the centre.
- All parties supported to focus on the child's needs and feelings (facilitated by relationships formed in Stage 1).
- Timescales of the moves varied, with an average of 21 days between first meeting and moving in (over 30 days common for older children).

Our baby's feelings were put central. Each day, every adult concerned evaluated how well she was doing -whether we needed to slow things down or speed it up. Brilliantly flexible, but very careful too. (Adoptive parent)

Stage 3: Supporting relationships after the move

This stage covered the period from the official placement day through to the statutory review, held four weeks afterwards. The full range of relationships were significant here – including those between the adopters and the child, the foster carers and the child, the foster carers and the adopters, and those of the social workers between themselves and with the child and the families. In some cases the child/adopters' relationships with birth family members also needed to be supported.

Helpful areas of practice at Stage 3:

- Continuity of foster carer relationships promoted through a range of indirect contact and visiting arrangements.
- Some continuity of environment achieved, in line with individual child's needs.
- Child's enjoyment of new environment promoted sensitively.

I think that the amount of time he was able to spend in the adopters' house and in their company whilst I was still present to reassure him definitely made the move much easier for him. (Foster carer)

Challenges encountered at all stages

Challenges in working within the principles of the practice programme were encountered in a small minority of the cases. They included:

- Resistance/uncertainty from some professionals, foster carers and adopters.
- Unexpected events at all stages.
- The need for additional communication within the team around the child.
- Uncertainty over who 'holds the reins' of the plan.
- The lack of a familiar framework for managing unexpected situations.
- The need for additional social work time and resources in some cases.
- The lack of 'protocols' for adopters and foster carers around post placement visits.
- Understanding and responding appropriately to distress or confusion for the child, the

adopters or the foster carers around post placement visits.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Feedback and lessons learned from the piloting process have enabled us to feel confident that the principles of the practice programme are sound and that, with some further development, the programme has the potential to improve the experience of moving to adoption for children, foster carers and adopters. There are also good indicators that the practice programme can be successfully implemented by agencies, within existing procedures and legislation.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Strengths

The practice programme is drawn from child developmental theory, research in the field and existing good practice. It therefore provides a sound foundation for adjusting social work practice in a highly sensitive field.

Throughout the project there has been a high level of collaboration with foster carers, adopters and the range of professionals involved in moving children to adoption. The practice programme has been shaped and developed accordingly.

The practice programme has been piloted on a full cohort of children in two agencies over one year, enabling immediate impact on practice. The piloting process has also provided valuable indicators for further development of the programme, wider implementation and greater impact.

Limitations

This project has underlined the complexity of this area of social work. In any one case there are numerous variables at play, including the individual characteristics of the child, the adopters and the foster carers, the capacities of the professionals and the policies and procedures of the agencies. If the UEA model is to be widely available to managers and practitioners, it will need to be further developed in order to offer a roadmap through these areas and suggestions for different ways in which the principles of the UEA model might be held in mind within a wide range of situations.

FIND OUT MORE

NEXT STEPS - THE TEAM PLAN TO DEVELOP AND DISSEMINATE PRACTICE GUIDANCE FOR THIS PROGRAMME

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