



Moving to
Adoption policy

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About this document

Purpose: To support positive child centered transitions to adoption based on the University of East Anglia model

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1.1 Need for change

The motivation for this policy document and practice change was to respond to the 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. The principles have relevance to reviews in relation to the relationship at the heart of all transitions.

Neil Beek and Schofield moving to adoption practice development project (2018) details this.

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.

The body of evidence from practice guidance to has been growing over the last decade. AiM practitioners and their partner authorities were influenced by the approach advocated by Family Futures practice paper Planning for Transitions moving to Permanent Placements: (2009) “What do you do after you say after hello”. This combines elements based on Theraplay (Jernberg, 1979), Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (Hughes, 2006) and Neurosequentialism (Perry, 2006).

Devon County Council in their Good Practice Guide (2015) make reference to the research led by Julie Selwyn (2014) which found that there is an association between poorly managed transitions and later disruptions to the adoption, a situation where a child is returned to the placing agency, either pre or post adoption order.

It is clear that difficulties in an adoptive family can result in a number of challenging adopted-child behaviours, and the potential need for psychological services, respite and/or alternative foster care arrangements. Devon Good Practice guidance notes that

“With evolving research and knowledge as our base, this guidance aims to ensure that the warmth, love and security that the majority of these children will have internalised, is held as strongly as possible through the sometimes traumatic transition into their adoptive family.”

Why moves are so difficult for our children

The Children were fine research undertaken by Cudmore & Boswell in 2014 triggered a national conversation in the field of fostering and Adoption about transition and the impact they were having on children. The impact of transitions on children has been instrumental in developing a new awareness which encourages all involved in the transition process to be more reflective and carefully consider the impact on the child at each stage. The acknowledgement that procedural and practical considerations were leading to a less attuned approach from the carers workers and adopters now drives the training, planning and review of planned moves for children in AIM.

Devon's Transitions Policy (2015) challenges workers to imagine moving away from **all** of our life, including our family, job, friends, pets and possessions **all in one go**, as an adult, and how frightening and distressing that would be.

Now, if we were to imagine a small child, one who has likely experienced much trauma, having to undergo such a move, again (having already been removed from their birth family); we may then have some sense of the potential trauma a move to an adoptive family is likely to be.

However well-planned the move, the child is likely to experience it as a repetition of past abandonments and rejections unless such experiences are acknowledged, and the child is supported to approach this transition by those responsible for its care in a conscious and conscientious manner. (Devon CC 2015)

The concepts of 'permanence' and the 'future' are beyond the comprehension of children under the age of five, who have no real understanding of time The language around new families is considered in the planning process during the preparation of children and adoption.

Children may have a range of emotions from their past evoked by words such as 'mummy' and 'daddy' may evoke strong emotions triggering biological processes which the child is unconscious of. Strategies such as dissociation, aggression or compulsive care giving could be reactivated to cope with the stress of the move. Child-focused transitions can however, work to address and manage the potential trauma of such a move.

2.1 Practice Model

The model for children adopted in Merseyside is based on the Move to Adoption - Practice Programme. This was developed in 2017 by the Centre for Research on Children and Families and the University of East Anglia. It is designed to be used by adoption, fostering and children's social workers and is underpinned by the Secure Base model <https://www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/the-secure-base-model>.

The practice model 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.

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

2.2 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 though **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.

This approach promotes extending the overlap between foster carers and adoptive families. Any changes to the plan should remain child centred with management oversight.

It allows more time for the families to get used to each other before the move and more contact after. The period of intensive contact (previously called introductions) is usually completed in about two weeks, as before or longer for older children depending on their attachment history.

2.3

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.

This includes the addition of pre-meet or as is usually called in Merseyside a 'bump into meeting'. These are planned sessions for adopters to observe and play with the child **without caregiving tasks**. These meetings usually take place before matching panel, but the level will be based on a child individual need, and always with management oversight.

Practice Note 64 Coram BAAF - **Best practice in meetings between prospective adopters and children prior to matching (2017) considers the origin and application of bump into meetings**. The sector has become familiar with Adoption Activity Days (AAD) and the direct face-to-face interaction between children subject to placement orders and approved adopters.

I do think that I would rather have the opportunity to meet the children before getting all the way to the introductions to realise that there isn't a connection between us.

Adopter who attended an AAD.

Initially bump into meetings were used in the matching of older or hard to place children. The positive outcomes in reducing anxieties and increasing the confidence in the match led to an extension of its application to younger children.

The aim of this period is a gradual process of familiarisation in which the foster carers and the adopters, and similarly, the adopters and the child, can get to know each other and begin to build trust.

2.4 *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, to build relationship without being responsible for their care.
- **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).

2.5

Stage 2: Making the move

A plan to begin intensively preparing the child for the move will be tailored for each child, foster family and adoptive family unit.

Family Futures (2009) flagged up the importance of planning for the unique experiences of each child. However well planned a move is by the adults, the child will perceive it to be a repetition of past abandonments and rejections unless that experience is acknowledged, and the child empowered to approach this transition differently. They summarise this distinction as being trauma resolution instead of re-enactment.

Children who have experienced multiple separations or multiple care taking and chaotic unpredictable family environments will be psychologically programmed and prepared for those experiences to be repeated in foster care or in their adoptive family. It is vital that the foster carer acknowledges to the child their awareness of the child's previous life experiences and what their expectations may be of their future so that the child can be helped to change their beliefs about family life.

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.

2.6 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)

2.7

Stage 3: Supporting relationships after the move

A new approach

Family placement practise and vocabulary is riddled with "beginnings" "endings" "goodbyes" "clean breaks" and "new starts". Fortunately, most of us do not live our lives having this experience. Normal human attachment experience is more one of gradual transformations rather than disruptions. We would advocate therefore that with birth relatives, separated siblings and foster carers there is continuity despite change.

"For children in the care system who from a young age have experience abandonment, neglect and more in their relationships with significant attachment figures, it is important that this is not perpetuated or compounded by adoption based on a 'clean break' model of family placement." Family Futures (2009)

Advocating continued contact for children with an adoption plan is a departure for some practitioners. In May 2015, The Fostering Network published an online survey asking foster carers about contact with former foster children. 1,106 foster carers took part. The following statements featured in their Keeping Connected report.

"We would have loved to, but the new permanency carer did not wish us to keep in touch"

"If possible I do but sometimes the new parents don't want this."

“My agency has made it very clear I am not to keep in touch.”

It was clear from the responses that foster carers recognised the importance of the relationship between themselves and their former foster child – and their role in supporting the child once they had moved on. Yet 25 per cent of foster carers never or rarely stayed in contact with their former foster child.

“New adoptive parents couldn't cope with the grief experienced by the child leaving me and asked us to no longer visit. Very sad for the child and for us.”

“I think the current focus is on the short term needs of the new family and not on the long term needs of the child”

“There seems to be mixed views on whether this is beneficial to a child. Some Social workers advocate a clean break.”

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.

2.8 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.
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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)

2.9

It is important to stress that each transition plan will be formulated on a case by case basis. It will not be possible in all cases to promote contact between carers and adopters and the child. At times even with preparation and support some carers find the process of moving a child on so distressing they are not able to step back to push the needs of the children forward. Integrating a child into a family and then letting them go with grace is not a task all carers can achieve consistently throughout their whole career

because of their own relational ruptures. The impact of multiple losses in foster carer is considered by Lynes and Siteo (2019).

The Care Inquiry (2013) refers to relationships as the golden thread to children who have experienced trauma of living apart from their birth family.

It is the clear intention of this policy that children who have experienced hurt in relation are enabled to heal with the support of the significant relationship of their foster carer.

<https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/being-an-adoptive-parent/adoption-glossary/>

Key references

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