

# Belonging and Permanence

## Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption

This study is part of the Adoption Research Initiative (ARi), a group of major research projects commissioned by the former Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The dissemination of key messages from the initiative was funded by the Department for Education.

The research was undertaken by Dr. Nina Biehal and her colleagues at the University of York<sup>1</sup>. Data was gathered between 2005 and 2006.

This summary is based on a longer research brief and the full report of the study<sup>2</sup>. It reviews the methodology and findings and highlights the key messages from the research. Information about other resources from the study is available at the [ARi website](#).

### 1. Background to the study

It is widely accepted that adoption can provide security, stability and emotional warmth for many children who cannot grow up safely within their birth families. However, it is unlikely that adoption will be appropriate or achievable for all children who cannot return home and other forms of permanence must be secured for some. There has been debate and professional uncertainty about how to plan for and achieve permanence for the full range of children and little is known about different placement experiences from the viewpoint of the children and young people themselves. This research was commissioned to try to fill some of these knowledge gaps and provide information for all who are making permanence plans for looked after children.

### 2. What was the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study was to explore and compare the outcomes of three placement

options: adoption by 'strangers', adoption by foster carers and long-term foster care.

The following questions were addressed:

- How successful are these placement options in providing security and permanence, and in promoting positive outcomes for children?
- How do children perceive their sense of permanence and belonging in these different types of placement?

### 3. How was the research done?

There were five sources of information:

- **Focus groups and interviews** with managers, staff and foster carers in seven local authorities (LAs).
- **A census sample.** LA administrative data on 374 looked after children was analysed. The age range of most of the children was 7 to 18 years at the time the data was gathered.
- **A survey sample.** The carers and social workers of 196 children (drawn from the census sample) completed a postal survey. These children had been identified as fostered children in 1998-99 and, three years on, they had either been adopted by strangers or adopted by their foster carers or had remained in long term foster care. The carers and social workers of the children provided information for this study four to five years after that point.
- **Historical data** collected on 90 of the children in the survey sample was analysed. This data had been collected in previous studies of foster care conducted five and eight years earlier<sup>3 4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The full research team was Dr. Nina Biehal, Professor Ian Sinclair, Dr. Claire Baker and Sarah Ellison, University of York.

<sup>2</sup> The summary was drafted by Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to the Adoption Policy team, Department for Education, in consultation with the research team.

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair I., Wilson K. and Gibbs I. (2005) *Foster Placements. Why they succeed and why they fail*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair I., Baker C., Wilson K. and Gibbs I. (2005) *Foster Children. Where they go and how they get on*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- **Interviews** with 37 children (all of whom had been settled in their permanent placements for six years or more) and their foster carers or adoptive parents.

#### 4. Key findings

##### **Outcomes across the sample**

From the **census sample** of 374 children, seven or more years after they entered their original ('index') foster placements:

- Forty-five percent had left the care system through adoption, reunification with birth parents (less than 5%) or residence orders (less than 5%).
- Thirty-two percent were still settled in their index foster placement (the 'stable foster care' group).
- Twenty-three percent had left their index foster placements after living in them for three or more years (the 'unstable foster care' group).

The pathways taken by the children were significantly associated with their ages at last entry to care. Children adopted by strangers had last entered care considerably younger (average age 1.5 years) than those adopted by their foster carers (average age 3.1 years). In the stable foster care group, the average age at last entry to care was 3.9 years and in the unstable foster care group it was 5.3 years.

Some foster carers were reluctant to adopt the children they cared for due to fears that they may lose financial and social work support.

There were LA variations, showing that decisions about adoption may also be influenced by local policy, resources and practice cultures. For instance, there was a range of views about which children would benefit from adoption and the feasibility of seeking adoptive placements, particularly for older children.

#### Key messages

The following actions are likely to contribute to effective permanence planning in LAs:

- Develop a dynamic system of assessment for children in need, which proactively addresses the child's need for permanence through family support services, entry into care or otherwise. Delay caused by professional uncertainty at this stage may mean that children lose their chance of adoption or stable foster care.

- Make and execute permanence plans for looked after children as early as possible. Have in place a robust monitoring system to ensure that time is not lost and that avoidable delays are not occurring for any child.
- Consider the possibility of adoption for **every** child who cannot return home.
- Promote adoption by foster carers wherever appropriate, with systems in place to ensure ongoing support, including financial support.
- Develop a culture of evidence based confidence in the care system. This research shows that many children settle and have successful outcomes in long-term foster care. If entry into care for older children is seen as a 'last resort', there may be avoidable delay and the chances of achieving permanence through adoption or long term fostering may be reduced.

#### **Comparing the stability of long-term foster care and adoption**

Long-term foster care is intended to be permanent, but for many of the children in the study it did not endure. Of the index fostering placements, 28% had disrupted after three or more years, whereas 11% of the children who had been adopted or placed for adoption had experienced a disruption.

However, when comparing the stability of adoption and long-term foster care, it is difficult to compare like with like. The children entering long-term foster placements were usually older than those entering adoptive placements. Previous research on adoption and foster care has found a strong relationship between age at placement and the risk of disruption, so differences in disruption rates should be interpreted in the light of differences in age at placement.

Additionally, the children in this study who were adopted by strangers were notably younger, at the time of the survey, than those who remained in foster care. All placements are known to be more vulnerable to disruption as children get older, so this also makes it difficult to compare the two groups in terms of stability.

#### **What influenced placement stability?**

Several factors were found to be associated with placement stability:

- Age was important. For example, age at last entry to care was significantly higher in the unstable care group (average 5.3 yrs) than in the stable care group (average 3.6 yrs).

- The severity of the children's emotional and behavioural problems also increased the risk of placement disruption. Comparing scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, [SDQ]<sup>5</sup> completed five years earlier, the children in the unstable care group already had significantly worse scores, compared to children who went on to experience stable foster care or to be adopted.
- Carer-related reasons. Five years before this project, the index carers of the children in the unstable care group had been rated as less accepting, compared to the carers of the children in the stable care group. Children's emotional and behavioural difficulties and carers' parenting style may interact and combine to influence the risk of placement disruption.
- In a small number of cases, events in carers' lives, such as marital breakdown or bereavement, also contributed to the disruption of placements. Worryingly, for at least five per cent of the survey sample, previous long-term foster placements had ended when evidence of carer abuse or neglect had come to light. Clearly, placement quality is as important as placement stability.

### Key messages

This study suggests that the majority of looked after children find stability in adoption or long term foster care and this is encouraging, given their early adversity. The following steps may further increase placement stability:

- Ensure that every possible resource is utilised to support parents and children in need so that children can receive the incremental benefits of these in their early years.
- Conduct thorough, evidence based assessments of foster carers and adopters to ensure that they have the strengths and capacities necessary to care for troubled children.
- Prepare foster carers and adopters to offer a living environment that helps children to recover from adversity by promoting security, confidence, competence and resilience<sup>6</sup>.

### Comparing emotional and behavioural outcomes

Across the sample as a whole, 38 % of the children had total scores on the SDQ that indicated significant emotional and behavioural difficulties. Lower scores on the SDQ, indicating less serious difficulties, were predicted by entry to the current placement at the age of three or under.

There was no significant difference in SDQ scores between children in long-term foster care and those who had been adopted. Thus, children who were in stable foster care were doing no worse on this measure than those who were adopted. Children whose foster placements had disrupted, however, had significantly worse SDQ scores than those in stable foster placements.

For the sub-sample of 90 children who had been studied five and eight years earlier, scores on the SDQ generally showed little change over time. The severity of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties may therefore be largely determined by pre-placement adversity and the length of children's exposure to these adversities.

The children in stable foster care were doing as well on most measures of participation and progress in education as those who were adopted. Although they were more likely than the adopted children to display behavioural problems at school, they were no more likely to truant or be excluded and their scores were similar on a measure of general educational progress. The key predictor of poor participation and progress in education, however, was the severity of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (as measured by the SDQ).

The unstable care group was doing significantly worse on all measures of participation and progress in education. They were more likely to have truanted and also more likely to have been excluded from school in the previous six months and to do worse on the measure of educational progress.

<sup>5</sup> Goodman R. (1997) *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note*, Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 38, pp581-586.

<sup>6</sup> Beesley, P, (2010) *Making Good Assessments*, BAAF: London.

### Key messages

Children in stable, long-term foster placements and adopted children have similar needs and outcomes if they come to their families at an older age. The following steps will contribute to good practice:

- Promote long-term foster care, with confidence, as a viable permanence option for all children for whom adoption may not be suitable or achievable within a reasonable timescale.
- Use the SDQ (already in use for all looked after children) to help identify those at high risk of placement instability and therefore in need of particularly careful matching and additional resources pre and post placement.
- Provide equivalent levels of support with emotional difficulties for both late adopted and long-term fostered children. Plan services on the assumption that all permanently placed children and their adopters or foster carers may need to use the full range of services at some stage.
- Share resources, knowledge, skills, training, support groups etc. between fostering and adoption services wherever possible.

### **Perceptions of permanence and belonging**

Perceptions of belonging and permanence were explored in interviews with 37 children and their foster carers/adoptive parents.

Most of the children adopted by strangers had been placed as infants. For the majority of those interviewed, their primary identification was with their adoptive families. Birth parents were psychologically present to the children, to varying degrees, but none had any direct contact. These children appeared to feel emotionally secure in their adoptive families.

Children adopted by foster carers also indicated a strong sense of belonging to their adoptive families. Although a few wondered about their birth parents, there was no apparent sense of divided loyalties at this stage in the children's lives. The fact that carer-child relationships were already strong before the adoption application contributed to the success of these adoptions.

Most of those settled in long-term foster homes viewed their carers as parental figures and felt a strong sense of belonging to their foster families.

There were three main groupings of children in stable foster care:

- Those who had been placed with their carers in infancy and identified with them more or less exclusively, having no direct contact with birth parents. Adoption by their foster carers might have been more appropriate than long-term foster care for these children.
- Those who had relatively unproblematic face-to-face contact with birth parents. These children appeared able to reconcile that, in different ways, they belonged both to a birth family and a foster family.
- Those who were more obviously troubled by feelings of ambivalence, hurt and anger towards their birth parents. Although settled in their foster placements, complex feelings about their birth parents led them to feel a more qualified sense of belonging to their foster families. These conflicts of loyalty were not always apparent to their foster carers, some of whom perceived the child as their own and thought that he or she felt a reciprocal sense of unqualified belonging.

### Key messages

Both fostered and adopted children may have complex feelings about being separated from their birth families at different times in their lives. This research suggests that support services will be most effective if they:

- Acknowledge and encourage the expression of mixed feelings about the past for both children and their caregivers.
- Reassure all parties that mixed feelings are understandable and that they do not need to preclude a sense of belonging or permanence in the foster or adoptive family.
- Provide time, training and support to help front-line workers to engage and communicate effectively with children.
- Listen and respond to what children are saying – through their words and through their behaviour.
- Ensure that contact arrangements in both adoption and long term foster placements do not undermine the child's sense of belonging and permanence in the adoptive or foster family.
- Review contact plans regularly to make sure that they continue to meet the needs of the child.

## **5. Limitations and strengths and of the study**

### ***Limitations***

- The children in the sample were of different ages at key points in their care pathways. Therefore it was not possible to compare like with like in terms of outcomes.

### ***Strengths***

- The proposal for the study was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before the work was commissioned.
- The report was independently and anonymously peer-reviewed before its publication.
- The data for the project was gathered from multiple sources and perspectives: administrative records, social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents and children.
- The project used a highly experienced research team with significant experience of researching adoption. All data was cross checked within the research team.