



**Adoption  
Central  
England**

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**Practice Guidance**

**Preparing Children for Adoption**



## 1. Context - Preparing Children for Adoption

Once the agency has agreed adoption as the preferred permanence option, and the court has made a Care Order, the main focus of direct work with the child will change to preparation for adoption. Although the agency will be unable to place the child with prospective adopters until authority to place has been obtained through a Placement Order or formal parental consent, direct work should begin to focus on the meaning of adoption.

The work already undertaken (including direct work and life story work) is essential prerequisites to allow preparation for adoption to begin (for adoption).

Regulation 13 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 requires the agency to:

- Provide a counselling service for the child;
- Explain to the child in an appropriate manner the procedures for and the legal implications of adoption;
- Provide the child with appropriate written information about the above matters as relevant; and
  - Ascertain the child's wishes and feelings regarding;
  - The possibility of placement for adoption with a new family;
  - His religious and cultural upbringing; and
  - Contact with his parent or guardian or other relative, or with any other person the agency considers relevant.

Statutory Guidance on Adoption 2013 (Chapter 2 paras 2.16 – 2.21) develops the following ideas as follows:

### (i) Counselling

The child should be helped to understand:

- What adoption would mean for him or her now and in the longer term;
- Why the agency considers they should not stay with their own family or short term current carer, and why adoption is the preferred option for their permanence;
- The implications of adoption on their contact with parents, other family members and others.



## **(ii) Information**

Verbal information should be shared in a way which takes account of a range of possible factors, including:

- The child's first language;
- Communication or learning impairments;
- Religious beliefs or other values.

Written information should also be provided about the process and meaning of adoption. The Children's Guide - Understanding Adoption, should be used in work with children who have a permanence plan of adoption.

## **(iii) Diversity and Family Structures**

When preparing the child for adoption, it is important to recognise that there are all sorts of families and therefore talking to a child about having a "new mummy and daddy" should be avoided. It is more appropriate to talk in terms of having a "new family" with some explanation being given to the different sorts of families that exist.

## **(iv) Establishing the Child's Views**

It is important that the child's wishes and feelings are sought, recorded and taken into consideration at every stage.

## **2. Adoption Panel's Expectations**

At the plan stage, it is important that the Child's Permanence Report provides a clear and detailed explanation of what life story work has already been completed, what remains to be done, who will be responsible for this, and within what timescale. The Adoption Panel may well ask for clarification, in terms of how long it will be before active family finding can begin.

At the matching stage the Adoption Panel will expect an update on the progress of life story work and to see what has been produced so far in terms of a life story book.

## **3. Preparing the child or young person once prospective adopters have been identified and matched**

Once the agency has approved the placement of the child with specific adopters, preparation needs to focus on a new phase of direct work with the child. This will include the following:



- Identifying any further work that might need to be done in relation to the child saying “goodbye” to birth parents or other birth family members;
- Identifying any work that needs to be completed in relation to the current plans for contact with birth parents or other birth family members or any other people;
- Helping the child to express what s/he feels about leaving the current carer;
- Recognising that the child may be concerned about what the birth parent/s or other members of the birth family may feel about them moving to an adoptive family;
- Helping the child to express what they feel excited or worried about;
- Helping the child to think about what it is important to take with them from the current placement;
- Giving the child details/information about the adopters in a way that they can understand, e.g. a family book with photographs and other material prepared by the adopter/s;
- Helping the child to ask any questions they may have about the proposed adopter/s and to think about their feelings;
- Informing the child about the visits of introduction that are planned;
- Informing the child about the proposed timescales for introductions, overnight stays and finally moving in.

It is expected that the book will be available to the child and prospective adopters at the point of placement. Children will often ask questions or make comments about their history in the early stages of placement, and prospective adopters need to have the life story book to help them try to explain.

If this is not available at the point of placement, the Adoption Placement Plan must record the date by which the life story book should be completed, and this should be monitored at subsequent reviews. Prospective adopters will have grounds for complaint if the life story book is unreasonably delayed.

#### **4. Transferring the Life Story Book to the Adoptive Family**

The life story book one should be available when the child is placed for adoption. The ideal time to transfer the book to the prospective adopters is during the period of introductions. The first draft of the life story book should be given to the adopters by the second adoption review meeting and the completed life story book should be provided within 10 working days (or soon after if possible) of the adoption ceremony, i.e. the ceremony to celebrate the making of the adoption order.



Local authority managers should ensure that the child's case is not closed until after the later life letter and life story books are completed and provided.

When the life story book has been completed in draft, the child's social worker should share this with the prospective adopters' worker. A joint visit should then be arranged to go through the book with the prospective adopters. This is important to ensure that they are aware of the information it contains and the style of presentation. They should be invited to comment on this so that when the final book is produced they are fully committed to using it with their adopted child and allowing the child free access to it.

Once this is available, the child's worker should deliver the book to the adoptive family and go through it with the child and prospective adopters together, where the child is of an appropriate age to do so. This ensures that the child knows that the book is available, where it will be kept and how it can be accessed. It also means that the child is aware that the prospective adopters know about the child's past and there are no secrets.

Within 10 days (or as soon as possible) of the Adoption Celebration Hearing, the case record of the child can be closed.

## **5. Sources of Future information**

Preparation for adoption is a time-specific aspect of direct work with children, but life story work is an ongoing process which precedes this phase and also continues after placement for adoption. The life story book has the effect of freezing time, and adoptive parents will find it necessary to re-interpret the child's past as the child grows older, more questioning and more able to understand the circumstances of their adoption. The tools available to adopters to assist in this process are:

- Child's Permanence Report - prepared at the stage of identifying adoption as the preferred option for permanence. Given to the prospective adopters when considering the placement;
- Later Life Letter - prepared at the stage of placement. Given to the adopters within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony.

When completing the above reports consideration should be made as to the impact the information may have in the future as one of the functions of such reports is to act as "a source of important information for the adopted adult about their life history and heritage".

Child's Permanence Reports and Later Life Letters need to be child-centred.

Further detailed guidance can be found in Later Life Letters Guidance.



## 6. Bibliography

Guide to Confident Direct Work with Children  
(Yvonne Shemmings and Honor Rhodes, Community Care Inform, 2012)

“Making Life Story Books” – Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker

“A Child’s Journey Through Placement” by Vera Fahlberg

Talking Pictures – BAAF

“Techniques for Working with Children: 1- Pat Owen and Pat Curtis, C.M.C.V.S Print Service, St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, Manchester

Resources – Children’s pack for panel and adoption available from the Adoption Team

Attachment handbook for foster care and adoption.  
(Schofield, G. and Beek, M. BAAF, 2006)

Life Story Work: a practical guide to helping children understand their past.  
(Ryan, T. and Walker, R. BAAF, 2003)

Preparing children for permanence: A guide to undertaking direct work for social workers, foster carers and adoptive parents.  
(Mary Romaine, with Tricia Turley and Non Tuckey, BAAF 2007)

10 Top Tips for Placing Children.  
(Argent, H. BAAF, 2006)



## Appendix A: Principles of Direct Work and Life Story Work with Children and Young People

### Preparation

- Have a clear and purposeful plan to carry out direct work and life story work. Details of how the interventions will support meeting the child's needs should be included in care plans;
- Consider the child's developmental level and remember some children may operate at a level below their chronological age due to learning disability or being "stuck" emotionally. (See Resource Pack - Summaries of Child Development and also Vera Fahlberg, Child Development Workbook 1998 - BAAF);
- Be aware of cultural factors and research these e.g. race, religion, identity issues, different family and community norms;
- Check your records and your knowledge of background information and gather material on important events, the child's life, their family names, pets etc.
- Consult and share at all stages of the work with the child's carer and the supervising social worker. The foster carer should be informed of how and when the work will be done, and ask the child if he/she would like the foster carer present at each session. Foster carers will be able to provide emotional support for the child during and between sessions, so their close involvement is crucial. The work may be painful for the child, so prepare for this, as the carer will have to support the child following the session and they need to be aware of what occurred if they were not present during the session;
- Recognise your own feelings about personal experiences of loss and separation, grief and rejection as these may be triggered for you in your work with the child. Acknowledge these feelings and be aware of them to avoid them blocking you helping the child;
- Discuss the progress of your work in regular supervision with your line manager where appropriate advice and guidance should be given. Supervision is also an appropriate place to explore any personal feelings about the information you need to share with the child about their past as well as a way to gaining feedback regarding ongoing development of skills to support the child.

### Do...

- Get to know the child as well as possible and develop a friendly, trusting relationship (e.g. building rapport, providing undivided attention, refraining from use of Jargon, being clear with intentions, stick to planned visits, be reliable, etc....);



- Be clear with the foster carer that the focus of the visit is to undertake life story work, to avoid being side-tracked into discussing day-to-day placement issues;
- Do the work in a safe, comfortable environment and work physically on the child's level (e.g. usually on the floor);
- Respect the child's ability to solve problems and make choices (this may include not wishing to do a particular part of the work at any one time because they are not ready). Being flexible with the agenda for the session and working at the child's pace would be beneficial;
- Find out what the child can do well or what she/he enjoys. This will give them confidence, but give them the opportunity to try something new, and remember that children can also express themselves in play what they can't express in words;
- Check out your perceptions. They may not be the same as the child's. Acknowledge the child's feelings and give feedback of observations to the child;
- Respect confidences and be aware of what disclosures may need to be passed on. Explain why to the child;
- Be alert to non-verbal responses, e.g. body language, talking in 'third party', eye contact etc.
- Be prepared to go over things several times and in different ways, to convey the same message. Children don't always 'hear' things first time, particularly if it is painful.



## **Appendix B: Understanding and Telling**

### **Understanding and Telling**

#### **Pre-verbal Stage**

Children at this stage:

- Begin to understand language before speech develops;
- Begin to process information;
- Need to hear and become familiar with the word “adoption”, leading to emotional acceptance of adoption and greater receptiveness to more complex information later on.

#### **2 - 6 Years**

Most pre-school age children do not understand much about adoption even though told they are adopted. They may use the word in referring to themselves, but they often confuse being born with being adopted.

Children at this stage:

- Are egocentric and can't see another's point of view;
- Can't handle too many bits of information all at once;
- Think they are responsible for everything that happens (magical thinking);
- Have a different concept of time to adults;
- Don't understand relationships;
- Find greater significance in where they live and who cares for them;
- Don't distinguish between the parental (caring) role and the parental (birth) relationship.

Children may respond to a simple story from their point of view, which concentrates on the here and now.

#### **6 - 8 Years**

Children at this stage:

- Understand the difference between adoption and birth as alternative ways of entering a family;



- Accept adoption as permanent, but don't understand why;
- This acceptance relies on "blind faith" (e.g. because Mummy says so").

Children are likely to accept their story without question and accept the basic explanations provided.

## **8 - 10 Years**

Children at this stage:

- Develop a more sophisticated understanding of adoption;
- Can see things from other people's point of view;
- Can see other sides to a story and consider alternatives;
- Can distinguish between perception and reality;
- May begin to recognise the loss of their birth family and grieve;
- May begin to question the permanence of adoption, thinking birth parents may re-claim or adoptive parents give them up;
- May regress to an earlier stage of development as they struggle to deal with more complex thoughts and the fear that this may not be permanent;
- Children's understanding of adoption increases, resulting in more questions, which need more detailed answers and may become more challenging. Children need reassurance from their adoptive parents that they are here to stay.

## **10 - 13 Years**

Children at this stage:

- Begin to grasp the concept that there was a legal process involved with their adoption;
- Are still unsure about why this has made their adoption permanent.

## **13 Years +**

Children appreciate that adoption involves the legal transfer of parental responsibility, with all the rights and responsibilities this entails, from their birth parents to their adoptive parents.

