

Episode 18: Part two - 'Adoption by foster carers' - interview with author Elaine Dibben

00:00:00 Jo Francis

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis, CoramBAAF's Publishing Manager. And today I'm talking to Elaine Dibben about the book adoption by foster carers. This is a new, fully updated edition of the book in our popular Good Practice Guide series. Elaine wrote the book along with her co-author, Viv Howorth. Elaine, is an independent social work consultant and also chairs adoption and fostering.

00:00:22 Jo Francis

She has a great deal of experience in the sector and has written on various subjects including adoption, assessment and parent and child fostering. Welcome Elaine.

00:00:31 Elaine Dibben

Thank you, Jo. Nice to be here.

00:00:32 Jo Francis

So, Elaine, your book explores adoption by foster carers. How common is this, and does it get the attention it deserves?

00:00:40 Elaine Dibben

Well, that's a really good question, Jo. And I think it's difficult to answer how common it is. It's never easy to gather statistics. We know that in the past, probably foster carers adopting.

00:00:52 Elaine Dibben

Has been sort of between about 10 and 15% of the of the adoptions that took place. Unfortunately, in more recent years in terms of trying to get the statistics, those statistics have now been skewed because where children are being adopted following being placed in early permanence placements where they're placed with a foster carer who's then going to adopt them.

00:01:12 Elaine Dibben

The statistics don't differentiate between a foster carer who's a short term foster carer who adopts and then an early permanent carer, so it's it's not really possible now to kind of try and work that out, but certainly in the past what we know is it was probably 10 to 15% of adoptions.

00:01:28 Elaine Dibben

Was where a child was being adopted by their foster carer and in terms of whether it gets the attention it deserves, I don't think it does. I think that there's a lot of of myths and misunderstandings really about adopt foster carers who want to adopt and the kind of benefits of that, and how that should be viewed in terms of whether that's appropriate for the child.

00:01:48 Elaine Dibben

Well, I think that they're in the past. I think it tended to be that people saw adoption and fostering very differently. There was quite a lot of suspicion of foster carers who then decided that they wanted to adopt A child, that they were fostering. And we know from talking to.

00:02:00 Elaine Dibben

Foster carers that many of them.

00:02:02 Elaine Dibben

Viewed quite negative responses when they put their views forward and and and said that they'd like to adopt the child that they were caring for. You know, from particularly from sort of social workers, sometimes from the fostering teams themselves. So I think over time it's it's been quite misunderstood route to adoption really.

00:02:20 Jo Francis

I see what you mean. I mean, we know that adoption by foster carers can be a great option for some children in care to gain a permanent home, but I imagine there can be.

00:02:29 Jo Francis

Challenges as well as benefits to this route.

00:02:32 Elaine Dibben

Absolutely. But I think just wanting to start with the positives, really. Yeah. So the positive is that the child remains and we'll hear from Isla, you know the the child that she was fostering, you know she she had the child from six months and that child will will not have any further moves. You know that child will will stay in the family where they become.

00:02:52 Elaine Dibben

Settle them. They're they've got established relationships. And so, you know, I think you know we talk a lot about the importance of trying to minimise moves for children and I think you know, adoption via foster.

00:03:03 Elaine Dibben

There absolutely means that a child is going to stay where they are. They maintain those relationships with the foster care and with the wider foster carer family, and certainly for older children. It means they can stay in their same schools, that they can retain their friendship groups. You know, the clubs that they go to. So you know, there's an awful lot for a child that in terms of.

00:03:23 Elaine Dibben

Being able to.

00:03:24 Elaine Dibben

To remain where they are happy and where they are settled and.

00:03:27 Elaine Dibben

Where they feel secure.

00:03:29 Jo Francis

Differently.

00:03:29 Elaine Dibben

Those are the sort of real positives there's also, I think the fact that often and again.

00:03:34 Elaine Dibben

That was discussed by.

00:03:35 Elaine Dibben

Isla, that there can be some very positive relationships formed.

00:03:39 Elaine Dibben

Queen Foster carers and the birth family members of the child that they're caring for, and so there's a sort of strong possibility of those relationships being able to be maintained in whatever way is appropriate and as they move through into adoption. And I think that's also a real strength. The challenges I guess are because originally obviously the.

00:03:59 Elaine Dibben

Foster carers didn't come into this the situation they find themselves in wanting to adopt A child so.

00:04:05 Elaine Dibben

So, there will be a whole lot of changes that they will need to think about, but also when the social workers were originally placing the child with the foster care as they may not have given as.

00:04:14 Elaine Dibben

Much thought to.

00:04:16 Elaine Dibben

The geography of the place where it was in relation to birth, family members and foster carers sometimes, you know fostering is their sort of main.

00:04:25 Elaine Dibben

The main job, their main source of income, and so in moving to thinking about adopting a child, that's with them, they have to kind of think about all those other things in terms of whether they continue fostering in their sort of main role.

00:04:37 Elaine Dibben

You know what that means for them financially. So, there are a lot of things that need to be thought through, both by the foster carers and by the social workers.

00:04:44 Elaine Dibben

That are working with them.

00:04:45 Jo Francis

So, it's a real change of expectations on all sides, but of course it can be very positive for the child.

00:04:48 Elaine Dibben

Yeah.

00:04:50 Elaine Dibben

But absolutely with the benefits sort of at the forefront, really, you're thinking what, how the child is going to benefit from this more than anything else really?

00:04:58 Jo Francis

And of course, it is the child's best interests that should be the most important thing here. So, a really strong point of the book is the way that you've based it on the actual views of foster carers who?

00:05:08 Jo Francis

Have adopted social worker views. You interviewed numerous carers and workers about their experiences. What did you learn from this process?

00:05:16 Elaine Dibben

I think the absolute key thing that comes from talking with foster carers is that they're the.

00:05:22 Elaine Dibben

Motivation that they have for putting themselves forward to adopt is the relationship that they've built up with the child and often that will have.

00:05:29 Elaine Dibben

Prize them. You know, some of the foster carers that we talked to have been fostering for a number of years, and they've moved many children on into adoption back to their first family members, talked about this particular child that had just meant something more to them, really, that that there was a an, an extra bond there that led them to feel that actually this was a child that they didn't want to move on, that they wanted to sort of, you know, they wanted to.

00:05:51 Elaine Dibben

Keep forever and I think, interestingly, sometimes those foster carers had supported children through health procedures. They felt very protective about what the children had already been through, so they did feel quite strongly that the child shouldn't have any more moves that they needed. People who knew and understood them and understood some of the things that they'd already been through during the time that they've been living in the fostering.

00:06:12 Elaine Dibben

I'm.

00:06:13 Elaine Dibben

You know, some foster carers don't put themselves forward initially, but it may be as a result of an adoption placement that falls through that. They then feel that actually they can't see the child going through anymore moves any more disappointments and it's that's the point at

which they then put themselves forward. But I think whatever the whatever the reasons it it's always very much child.

00:06:33 Elaine Dibben

Focused and based on what they feel is the right thing for them.

00:06:36 Jo Francis

Child to see.

00:06:39 Jo Francis

And certainly, some fascinating evidence in the book as well. I noted from legal cases and the new edition updates these legal cases right up to the present day. So what do these legal cases of foster carers adopting tell us about the way local authorities and RA's handle adoption by foster carers?

00:06:57 Elaine Dibben

I think all of the.

00:06:58 Elaine Dibben

Cases that we've talked about both.

00:07:01 Elaine Dibben

Previously and the newer ones that we've updated the book with highlight that that there's often a lot of misunderstanding in terms of all of the people who are involved in these processes. So, you might have social workers who aren't clear about kind of the processes they need to use and ILA made some reference to that. There are there are situations where.

00:07:21 Elaine Dibben

Courts have dealt with things wrongly as well, and, and those are some of the cases that we've given examples of and the difficulty of.

00:07:28 Elaine Dibben

Course is that we're correct.

00:07:29 Elaine Dibben

Processes aren't followed then that introduces further delays for the child and for the family that that are obviously not in anybody's best interest. There's one particular case that that we've got which is in the newer version, which is about a foster carer who want who put

themselves forward to adopt A child that had been in their care. The child had three older siblings.

00:07:37

I'm going.

00:07:49 Elaine Dibben

And originally the local authority had supported the child remaining with her foster care for adoption. But then there was a change of plan and that was going to involve the child being removed from the foster carers in place.

00:08:03 Elaine Dibben

Her older siblings and and being returned to country of origin outside of the UK when the court granted the appeal and they said that there was no reason why the relation the requirement to consider the relationships that there are with the child's family members continuing should not also extend to other relationships identified by the courts as relevant and including.

00:08:23 Elaine Dibben

A relationship with a foster carer that where a child, particularly a child of a particular age, had formed a strong one with the carer. It was in the child's interest for the court to consider the likelihood and value of that relationship.

00:08:35 Elaine Dibben

Viewing and I think that's really important and really highlights the value that the law kind of recognises of that strength of that relationship between the child and their foster carer when people are making plans for that child.

00:08:48 Jo Francis

Absolutely. I can see that. That's a key section within the book that I can imagine social workers may find it very useful to.

00:08:54 Elaine Dibben

Look at that and I think the other thing that comes from that really is just that it's so important that that social workers involve their legal teams from an early.

00:09:05 Elaine Dibben

Point in the you know where it where it becomes clear that a foster carer is wanting to put themselves forward to adopt that that there are discussions with legal teams about what's the

right route for that, because there are different routes that cross to carers, can make direct applications to call or they can go it or it can go through as an agency adoption. I know that there's some.

00:09:25 Elaine Dibben

Then case law that would show that courts tend to prefer that it goes through as an agency adoption where the foster care is approved as an adoptive parent first of all, and then the child is placed with them as an agency.

00:09:35 Elaine Dibben

Adoption, but there are other there are.

00:09:37 Elaine Dibben

Other routes, and I think it's really important that social workers get early advice from their legal teams about what's the way to.

00:09:44 Elaine Dibben

Go forward and that everybody that's involved understands those processes.

00:09:48 Jo Francis

And I can see that's sort of sage advice after all this. This is a complex area, practical terms, then some of the issues social workers could consider when they are assessing foster carers who want to adopt. They are similar issues to those they would consider for anyone else. But your book does identify some key differences when assessing carers to adopt.

00:10:07 Jo Francis

So what should workers consider in this area?

00:10:10 Elaine Dibben

I think where they have to start really is is what's the foster, the foster carers motivation and understanding that that will be very different from a if you like a mainstream adopter that that foster care is.

00:10:23 Elaine Dibben

Aren't generally coming into fostering so that they can add a child to their family so that they can offer a child a sort of lifelong placement and often you know, they may well have their own children already, so they're not seeking to.

00:10:35 Elaine Dibben

Become parents so.

00:10:36 Elaine Dibben

The motivation will be very much related to this specific child and the particular situation.

00:10:43 Elaine Dibben

Around that child and the things that they've you know, experienced since the child's been placed with them.

00:10:48 Elaine Dibben

So, it's really important that people start with that and understand the story and the motivation behind the foster carers wish to adopt. Then there will be some of the other issues that that have come. We've already mentioned with the fact that there's going to be quite a significant change in the foster carer circumstances. They're going to have to consider things like whether it's going to be appropriate for them to foster, continue to foster, they may not have.

00:11:09 Elaine Dibben

Further accommodation, it may well be that people feel that the child needs time to settle and may never kind of respond to other children coming in and out of the home. If the foster care is going to continue to foster. So those things need to be thought about.

00:11:24 Elaine Dibben

Inevitably, for some carers, if fostering is their main job as you, if you like, then there will be issues around sort of financial support now the legislation that we have in place allows there to be a cushion of financial support so that local authorities can continue to pay foster carers for the equivalent of their fostering.

00:11:44 Elaine Dibben

Allowance for the first two years after the adoption goes through and that gives people that chance really to kind of relook at their own lives and sort of think about how they would see things moving forward with that sort of financial cushion. While they do that, really and.

00:11:59 Elaine Dibben

And so, you know, that's something that local authorities need to think about at an early point. And then I think the other thing is just thinking about other family members. So, if there are other children in the family, then they may be quite young children that have been living with the child and very much see them as part of the family now. But they might be older children who are no longer in the home. And of course, you know, when a.

00:12:18 Elaine Dibben

Foster care is going to adopt A child.

00:12:20 Elaine Dibben

That's, you know, that is a sort of a lifetime commitment that it will change things in terms of inheritance for other family members.

00:12:27 Elaine Dibben

So all those things need to be thought through and you know, and depending on the age of other family members and you know that need to be discussed with them really so that that everybody's clear that there's going to be support for this for the child going forward.

00:12:40 Jo Francis

And also consider these are very important things to consider. As a layperson, I assumed that the matching process would be relatively easy for foster carers. Adopting a child in their care.

00:12:52 Jo Francis

There, but your book identifies some important issues here as well. What the social workers need to think about around matching.

00:12:58 Elaine Dibben

Well, again as we've.

00:12:59 Elaine Dibben

Already said, I think the fact that this is this wasn't the original plan for the child, and it also wasn't the original plan for the carers. So I think that that what social workers need to do is look at the individual situation and think about.

00:13:12 Elaine Dibben

Kind of. What's the best? What's best for the child, but also think about what what other supports need to be put in place for the foster carers. So for example, you know, foster carers are given quite limited information, sometimes about the children they're looking after and.

00:13:26 Elaine Dibben

And that's kind of.

00:13:27 Elaine Dibben

Appropriate in terms of sort of issues around confidentiality for.

00:13:30 Elaine Dibben

Both family members.

00:13:31 Elaine Dibben

But obviously if they're moving into thinking about adoption of the child, then they need to have full information really about the child's history, about the health issues that they might be for the child based on both their sort of pre birth experiences and and and other kind of things that are known in terms of the extended family. There might be health issues that need to.

00:13:49 Elaine Dibben

Be thought about?

00:13:51 Elaine Dibben

So it's really important before the foster carer kind of moves to making their final decision about whether this is right for them and their family that they have got all of the information that they need to make that decision. And then I think there are potentially there may be issues that that come up in terms of where the foster care is living, if there are.

00:14:08 Elaine Dibben

Concerns about the fact that they are near to where family members live, then there needs to be some risk assessment about whether that poses any risks for the child and for the family. It doesn't necessarily need to rule out adoption as appropriate, and there are examples of where foster carers have actually moved home and moved area because it's felt that.

00:14:29 Elaine Dibben

It's too risky for them to remain in the area where they're living.

00:14:32 Elaine Dibben

Things so.

00:14:32 Elaine Dibben

All of these things need to be openly thought about and discussed with them really, but I think it's important to have those conversations rather than to see things as an automatically kind of ruling this out as an option that that everybody needs to be involved in thinking about what that might mean for the child and for the.

00:14:48 Jo Francis

Family. Yes, I can see things are quite complex here and.

00:14:52 Jo Francis

It really does take discussion. One more question here. Of course joint working is important in this area between fostering agencies and adoption agencies and within RA's themselves. Have you got any tips for this for social workers?

00:15:07 Elaine Dibben

I mean I.

00:15:07 Elaine Dibben

Think one of the issues that there will be.

00:15:09 Elaine Dibben

For some RA's, and obviously REA's differ in the way that they've been set up and established, but you know, foster carers adopting is not. It's not a routine thing. Social workers may well be finding themselves in a situation where this is something that they've not experienced before. You need to have really good joint working between all of the people.

00:15:29 Elaine Dibben

Who are in?

00:15:29 Elaine Dibben

All professionals that are involved in this and that that will include the child social worker. It will include the fostering worker and the fostering service and.

00:15:37 Elaine Dibben

And again, before RA's existed then, you might have had adoption and fostering teams that were situated in the same building, having much closer relationships. Now, they may well not have particularly close relationships. They may be sort of situated in different places and it would be really important for the child saying she worker the fostering social worker and the adoption social worker.

00:15:57 Elaine Dibben

The end point, the family Finder from.

00:15:59 Elaine Dibben

The RA all to be able to make sure that they're working together and and also kind of giving consistent messages to the foster carers because otherwise I can potentially see confusion,

really where, where, perhaps wrong advice or wrong information is being given to foster carers that's not being checked out with the the rest of the the team around them.

00:16:19 Elaine Dibben

So I think it is just that really important thing about joint working and and making sure that that that there's good communication between all the professionals involved.

00:16:28 Jo Francis

Well, thank you very much, Elaine. That's a fascinating account and I can see that there's a lot of things for social workers to think about.

00:16:35 Jo Francis

Any final points you want to make I.

00:16:37 Elaine Dibben

Mean. I think the most important thing for me is I, I mean, I believe very strongly that for some children being adopted by their foster carers is absolutely the best outcome for them. And so I would just urge social workers to be open to the idea of that and to really think about kind of whether this might be right.

00:16:55 Elaine Dibben

The particular child that they're working with.

00:16:57 Jo Francis

Thank you very much, Elaine, for your time. That has been a really interesting.

00:17:00 Jo Francis

Nation just to remind listeners that adoption by foster carers, Elaine's book is available on the call and Bath book Shop, so do you head over there if you'd like to find out some more information. And once again, Elaine, thank you very much for your insights.

00:17:15 Elaine Dibben

Thanks very much, Jo.