

Episode 39 | Encouraging adoption in Black African and Caribbean communities transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We asked children's social care professionals and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Welcome to another episode of CoramBAAF Conversations. I'm Jane Poore. I'm the Adoption Consultant at CoramBAAF, and I'm delighted to be joined today by Jennifer Kwakye, from Coram Ambitious for Adoption. Jennifer is the Adoption Outreach Ambassador for Black, African and Caribbean families. Do you want to tell us a little bit more about yourself and your role, Jennifer, and how it came about?

Yes. Thank you, Jane, thank you for inviting me on. And as you say, Adoption Outreach Ambassador for Black, African and Caribbean families. And that's with Coram, and Coram are a voluntary adoption agency who are in partnership with 9 local authorities across the London region. So my role came about as a response to the government statistics. And the racial disparity unit, which revealed that black children are disproportionately represented in the care system and in particular black children who have a plan for adoption, wait much longer than any other group of children. Look for an adoptive placement. So my role in response to that is to reach the black, African and Caribbean communities and encourage them to come forward and find out more about adoption and about the needs of the children who are waiting to be adopted.

Yeah, that's great, Jennifer. And I think I think you're are you on secondment.

Yes, it's a two year secondment and the role started in April 2023, so it ends in March 2025.

So you mentioned there the statistics from the racial disparity unit and. That also quoted, as you know, black children more likely to be in the care system. There's 7% more looked after compared to 5% of the overall under 18 population. And we know that black children, black boys in particular, wait longer to be adopted and to find their homes. So if we just look at the racial disparity numbers, black African children wait longer to find their adoptive family and that wait is an average 27 to 33 months. Compared to children of all backgrounds who wait on average 21 months, so that's significant longer when you think you know that 6-9 months, that's nearly a whole year out of a 2-3 or four year old child.

Exactly.

That's a quarter of their lifetime, longer in some in some cases, and white children make up 83% of adoptions and wait 17 to 23 months for their permanent family. And one final set of statistics, the black adoption project. The Phase One report states that the number of black

children adopted has decreased from 120 in 2015 to only 60 in 2022. You must have had thoughts about the reasons behind.

Right.

These statistics. And your role is obviously aimed at tackling some of these disparities. So what? What are your thoughts about the background about? The statistics.

Yeah, I mean, I agree with you. The figures are alarming. I mean to have, you know, a certain group of children remaining in care because of the colour of their skin. It's, you know, it's quite sad really. So. I mean in terms of my role specifically it's there to raise awareness of these. Statistics as such, but also to kind of inform our communities that these children are waiting in care, are waiting in foster care, and that's not a permanent. If that's not a permanent home for a child. So we know that, you know, children will thrive once they're in a secure family and they feel settled and stable, they really do thrive and permanent and permanent and permanent. Doctor Family is is is, you know the secure. For a child. So so my. Role is, it's more about the response to that.

And we and we know it's really important for them to be placed in those adoptive placements or stable homes at the earliest opportunity. We know that's the best for their emotional development and well-being. It's not. All round.

That's right. And at the earliest opportunity as well and also with families who can share and understand their cultural heritage and identity, because you can imagine if a child has been taken away from everything they know. Yeah.

Absolutely.

You know that's. A fair history has it doesn't go anywhere, so they need somebody who can support them and encourage them to, you know, take pride in their culture and heritage.

And really understand that that the minutia details of those cultural and. Identity aspects.

Exactly, and help the child build on that as well as moving forward with other traumas and, you know, concerns that that, that, that might be there already. So we're really encouraging families, single actually singles and couples.

Yeah.

To come forward.

Yeah.

You know to, to find out even if. They may not necessarily be ready at this stage, but at least they'll come and find out more about the process and about the children.

I mean, the other aspect of it is that we know that black adoptors face longer waiting times when they do come forward, so they may come forward and be assessed, but then wait longer to be matched, which seems really. Odd when you think how much they're needed. And we've said you know how much they really are needed. So. So what what's behind that?

We have looked at this and we think it may be again the cultural match. Because obviously there are all different parts of African and Caribbean heritage, so government guidelines are that you don't look, you don't look for an exact match at the expense of a child waiting. Waiting in that respect, you go for the best family for that child at that time. So I think what we need to do is maybe more support for families who may not quite match the child's background 100%. But they have the capacity. To support that child with their identity.

Yeah, yeah.

So sorry, for example, we may have African adoptors adopting a child. From a different part of Africa than the child is from, so it's about supporting that family to feel confident that with the identity, the culture. Religion, perhaps, in that they can meet the needs of that child.

I think also there's sometimes. An unconscious bias and societal stereotypes that black children are more challenging to look after in boys.

That's right. Black Portland. That's right. And especially boys. Yes, as you say. So I think that might because, you know, we know that boys are, you know, stay in care longer than probably black girls. So it's, you know, they're the things that we need to tackle as well as you know as adoption agencies. To encourage people to really come forward. But it's I think it's making sure that people understand there is support out there. So it's not saying that these aren't challenges aren't there? They are. Evidently they are. But there won't be support. To support you with managing. Any difficulties or challenges that you have for with from any child's background?

I think there's also a wider cultural issue about. You know, we know that adoptions based on very white esoteric values innately. And we need to break that down and and make it accessible for all cultures and all backgrounds so that. Black adoptors see themselves represented in the workforce and feel able to approach and know that they will be valued and supported for the experiences that they bring .

Exactly. And then I think that comes at the very initial stages when they when you know that the work that I do, it's encouraging to have the support from core and social work team. With within Koram and within our partner agencies who support these events that I do so when. Inquiries come forward. They see social workers who look like them, who can understand their background, their family background.

Yeah.

You know their migration, their parents or grandparents migration over here so that you know, within feedback from a doctors that has been really wonderful for some doctors who've been through the assessment and have been assessed by a social worker who really understands.

We really understand that popular in their history. Yeah, yeah, that's great in. In your blog, you pointed out that.

That their history out. Exactly.

Fostering is a familiar concept within African Caribbean communities, and that's something that's commonly done. Other reasons why fostering is more accepted than adoption, do you think?

I think it's kind of historically we didn't even use the term fostering. We just you know you just went to live with your auntie or your grandmother. Exactly.

Yeah, yeah.

And sometimes even friends or your cousin would be living with you, and it wasn't necessarily. String, but I think modern day. If we look at adoption. Financially, there is more financial support for fostering. Fostering is seen as a job, whereas adoption obviously you're taking the child and there isn't any. Sort of long term financial support to fight. Yeah, sometimes. So now.

Sometimes there isn't this that.

If we're looking in London especially, we need our adopters to have a spare room, obviously because of the, the backgrounds of the children coming into care into the adoption. That they do need their own space, so socioeconomically. Not many people have a spare room in London.

A big challenge, yeah.

It exactly, and whether it's even home ownership, lots of. Owning homes and probably moving to the outskirts of London, but within London itself, many people rent and renting is so far as it's a stable rent, rented accommodation. It's not a bar, that's fine.

OK, fine.

But you know how many people would be in a position to be renting a property and have a spare room if you see what I mean? So. So I think that's a big barrier to some people who would otherwise have to. Capacity and resources, family resources, family support to adopt A child. I mean secondly, we've, we've gathered from. Feedback from a doctors who've been through the system is that this isn't just pertaining to adoption, it's actually it's sort of in Australian as well. But the assessment process can feel quite intrusive.

Yeah.

And if for example, you know you had difficulties or challenges as a teenager. You may be reluctant to share that with a stranger or a professional, somebody that you know you don't really have any connection with, but sometimes these bar people will think that will bar them from coming forward.

Yeah.

Whereas what we're saying is that at being social workers. You know we haven't. Experienced of all different types of family. And sometimes those difficult backgrounds are what can make you more resilient to understand the backgrounds of the children who are coming forward for adoption. So. Yeah.

Absolutely, yeah. I would you can say to my adopters that I was assessing was you know all the things that you think you wouldn't tell somebody when you're applying for a job. Those are the things that are actually going to get you.

Exactly.

You know those challenges, the bits where you've had those really difficult times in your? Like you may have got into the wrong company when you were being a all those things we can work through them, you know, and and most of the time I'm not a bar to becoming a doctors but it's about building those relationships with your assessing.

That's it exactly. Exactly. That's fine. I mean, we don't accept anyone has criminal conviction for offences against children, obviously, but minor offences that you know happen in your childhood, it really is about talking to the social worker.

Yeah, medical conditions as well. There's very few of those that are actually a bar to. Adoption because it's about your support network and who you've got around you and how you would cope with that in a time where maybe a medical condition impacted on your ability to care for your child.

Exactly. And also physical and emotional stamina.

Yeah.

You know, it's about how you've dealt with your your condition in the past. And then how? Because that's a reflection of how you will deal with it in in the future. So if I you look for an example counselling, some people might be reluctant to be open that they've had counselling or. Depression. But it's not that you've had these things. It's more about how you manage them and. In future, what experience have you had in managing these that you could draw on?

So as adoption outreach Ambassador, what challenges do you face in building relationships and networks within the black communities that you work with and and how do you overcome some of those?

The main challenge has been sort of. Directly to the people who can make a make a difference, if that makes.

OK. Yeah, yeah.

So if. Use for an example if I'm trying to. Find my way into a church, a particular church for them to advertise. One of our events. It's like you need to nowadays churches are kind of really big organisation so they have their marketing teams their you know, their comms teams, their fellowships, their, you know, all different.

Yeah.

Different departments, whereas back in the day you could have just gone to the pastor, now there might be 456 different pastors, so.

Yeah, since they work in hubs, don't they? Yeah, yeah.

It exactly so it's and also so much of it is online. And it's holding people's attention because events are coming through to everybody from all different directions. So as I was saying, it's not back in the day. You'd have a magazine, a weekly, you know, weekly pamphlet or something that you put the side of your table. So you knew that you could come back to it and have a look.

Yeah.

And you. You'd see something and you'd come back and remind that, oh, that's on. Week. Now everything's online. It's just two minutes. If you don't catch that person, not even 2 minutes.

Yeah, that's true. Yeah.

They've gone on now, so those are the. It is, but in saying that. We've, you know, we've. Managed to make contact for with one church in Notting Hill who kindly advertised an event we had in the summer in Kensington. And that was through, you know, I didn't need to go too high up. We've also been through our comms team, our internal comms team. We've advertised through a social media and online social media. Magazine called Black Ballad, and it's not, I won't say it's that well known. Broadly, but within a certain Community group of black women, it's it's known and we have quite a good response, relatively good response and when we advertised in that magazine. So I think it's. Knowing finding out and I'm still working these out the places though, because the places that you think might be great because they're big and everybody else, everybody's there. There are so many others who , who are advertising in the same places and so sometimes it's good to go to the smaller.

Yes, it's unpicking those networks and finding out which ones are the because sometimes you can advertise an event somewhere that you think is going to be really good and get no response. But as you stated in others, sometimes these little ones that kind.

That's right.

Connect more. You might you might get a much better response from them. Which part of your job do you enjoy most? Or which bit do you find the most rewarding?

It's not clear.

I was thinking about this and it's all been, you know, for the last 18 months, it's all been really interesting and new and new people and working with new people and so on. But I think overall, I mean working with the comms team has been integral.

Yeah.

And I've built new relationships and you know they understand the work we do and the importance and their, you know, they've just come on board and have. Sort of found leads to places to advertising places. Interviews, for example, that they've supported on. So that's been really great working with them also our social workers within the VAA, they've been really active and encouraging and the local authority. The social workers as well have been a great part of the online events and you know, actually want to be involved, you know. But I think that the most rewarding part is the information event.

Because that's where I'm meeting people who who are really, really at the very early stages of finding out about adoption, so many of them come and they they, you know, when they usually get about 5 to 10 people at any event. And to start with, it's very quiet because obviously everybody's new to each other. The silence is kind of broken by us, myself and the social workers give an introduction.

It's remarkable, really, how people quickly. Loosen and relax and ask questions. And share bits of their own personal history when they're in familiar surroundings with people who they feel are more, you know, are similar to them. So so has been really, really rewarding. So they're not afraid to ask questions.

They're not afraid to, you know, give their opinions on the information that they see. You know, if they might ask about, you know, well, why, why do you need? Why do you need, like, parents black, you know, you know, more black people. To come forward for adoption and that will open up the conversation. Of black children who are waiting in care. So it's it's really interesting. Yeah. Yeah. It's been it's been, yeah. That side.

So are there? Strategies that local authorities and organisations can use to build trust and encourage more individuals and families from black, African and Caribbean communities.

Yes, I think engaging with the community is a big one. As I said, so much is online these days. You know, it's hard to hold people's attention, but I think it's that it's we need to. To remind people that there are lots of children. Waiting in care for a permanent family? Yeah, at least I think it needs to be more visible. Yeah, not just in social care magazines or in social services offices. But in public spaces in in.

You know, train stations, billboards on buses.

I mean you, you know, one of the things you sent me in preparation for this conversation, there's 200 children in London alone who are waiting to be adopted. So they are no longer able to live with their families for whatever reason. They're in foster care and they need a permanent home and the vast majority of those are very little children, you know.

Yes. For under 4-5 year olds in. You know. And you know who they're looking for? An early permanence plan for them, maybe. And I know there's a real difficulty then and lack of adopters there too. Yeah.

That's right, I mean it's, you know, I think it's about for us getting the message out. I mean, you know, I I for some time back there was a big drive for foster carers. I think everything needs to be done across, you know joined up working across the boroughs for adoptive parents for the children. Who are waiting to be care and then the support as well. I mean that housing has been is a main factor for people not coming forward and some kind of joined up thinking a policy. On. Supporting families to be able to , you know, take these children permanently. Because sometimes we think it's lack of resources, but we're spending those resources in a different way, yes.

There is black adoption project working across London who are doing similar work to yourself, I think as well, which is good because the more people are doing it, the better. And, you know, encouraging churches and faith groups to become involved. And nd trying to get the contacts in there that you were talking about.

Exactly. And also for us as agencies to really promote the support that we offer, because corn, the great post adoption support service. And I suspect that's in, you know, some other agencies as well. So what whereas the doctors coming in probably wouldn't find out about that until they are, you know, quite far into the process. So I think it's, you know, being really, you know, kind of open about the type of sports, for example, education. We know that you know many children with needs have difficulty in education at some point, you know, letting a prospective for doctors know that there is lots of support there out there, when it when it comes to.

That. Have you got a success story that you can tell us about? Jennifer, it'd be nice to hear of a positive story from you.

What we have, I mean our our first event, our first information event was this time last year. So we're a year ahead. We're about to have the next one a couple of weeks time, but since October we've had four information events across held across our local authorities and a small number of these families have progressed into assessment. So hopefully, By this time next year, we'll have good news to say that they've also got children placed with them and are building nurturing. You know, family for their child, but on top of that, what we have had is approved black families who are very passionate and understand the need for more, more black families to come forward. They have agreed and have shared their adoption stories with us and have.

It's really good, yeah.

Helped us to promote the campaign. And you know, I always remember one of them said quite often in adoption, we talk about the difficulties and the challenges of taking these children on and they understand why, because also we have to prepare our adopters. But their response was that it's so rewarding and it's a joy, and they feel it's. They feel that it's a privilege that they've been. They're in this position to to adopt this child that they have.

How do we encourage? Black and Caribbean adopters to come. And and and people who want to work with them. How? How does everybody who works in adoption knows that that there is this, this issue of black children being over represented and they wait longer?

And which is so sad, and we really need to do something about it so. How do agencies in general begin to tackle those? That's right. Those issues. You know what, what are your thoughts about that? I think we need to.

Yeah, engine. Join up with community groups, the large community groups such as churches, faith groups.

Women's organisations, you know, men's men's groups and. This issue that we have.

It's about identifying those in your local area, and it sounds as if you've done it really well with that particular little group that that you found, but it's about.

And I think maybe as you've given some great examples of existing adopters telling their friends, telling them. Right.

Associates in their same communities that it is possible, and that it is accessible for them.

Looking forward, what what have you? How do you see your role developing and evolving over time? And this you said it's a two year project at the moment.

But hopefully we'll embed into the wider exactly and and that is the plan. So, so my role comes to the end, as I said in March 25.

But the work that.

I've. I've done so far will be embedded into the practise itself. So it'll be incorporated into the recruitment and assessment team and they'll continue. With the information events and we'll continue to have. Events for black families to come forward, you know, we'll continue to hold those and promote those.

I think you've got an event coming up on the 30th of October.

That's right that.

Tell us a bit about that.

I will that event is an information event and this particular event we've got a one of our adopters is coming forward as a guest speaker.

And.

She's very encouraging, wanting more black families to come forward, so it's coming forward to share her story about her reasons for adoption and her journey so far, she's adopted two children and one through early permanence, I think. So yes, so at this particular event is quite special because we will have a recent core and the doctor of two very young children. And that's up on 30th of October, and it's at 5:30, and it's at our core AM office in Bloomsbury. And you can find out more about that on our website, on our events page, on our core and adoption website at koramadoption.org, UK. And the people need to sign up for it first. They do. They do need to register. It's just a very quick registration form. And yeah, also they can contact me through the website and we can have an informal conversation. I'm always open to talking and discussing.

Anything else you want to add that we've not covered, Jennifer?

I think really just to encourage anybody in your network who is interested, not necessarily that they are ready to even adopt themselves, but interested in adoption and the needs of black children to consider adoption. Consider adoption may be within their family. Maybe they might have relatives who. Who? You know who might be in a position to adopt, but at least to find out more and to read, to contact, to talk about it. And if there are spaces where we can be invited to hold an event, then contact me and yeah, I'll. I'll be happy to. To discuss that.

That's great. Thank you, Jennifer. It's been really interesting hearing about and we've had this planned for quite a long time. I'm so glad we've actually validated to do it and get together. It's really interesting work and you did write A blog for us, which is on the core and. Website

actually. So that's accessible to our website as well and yeah, look forward to working with you again in the future maybe.

Each year. Thank you, Jane. Thank you very much.

Thank you. You're welcome. Thank you.

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