# Group work with adopted children and young people

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ADOPTION & FOSTERING ACADEMY

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Also thanks to all those people who have taught me about group work over the years and have created wonderful opportunities for me to work directly with young people.

Last, but definitely not least, thanks to my good friend and colleague, Mica May, who, as an experienced business coach, helped me to stay focused and pull this guide into shape, and gave me invaluable insights from her experiences of working therapeutically with adopted children.

## Note about the author

Henrietta Bond is a writer, coach and communications consultant who has worked in the fields of adoption, fostering and leaving care for nearly 30 years. Previously BAAF's media and information officer, she became a freelance consultant and journalist, and worked on a variety of projects, including group work with care-experienced children and young people. She has written a number of guides and her trilogy of novels for teenagers, the Control Freak series (available from CoramBAAF), came out of her close work with children and young people.

Henrietta is passionate about giving children and young people a voice and helping them to develop resilience and self-esteem, and is keen to develop the potential of coaching to help young people have more control over their own lives. As a writer, she also helps young people find creative ways to express themselves. Henrietta recognises that she has as much to learn from young people as they have to learn from her.

# Introduction

This book began with funding from the Department for Education's Sector Capacity Building Initiative (SCB) to look at sharing good practice among voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs).* As part of the capacity building programme, good practice was identified in bringing together adopted children and young people in groups, providing an opportunity for them to express their emotions and share their experiences with others from similar backgrounds. This book was commissioned to share such practice in any agencies in a good practice guide, and additional work was undertaken to look in depth at the work of a number of VAAs, whose staff came forward to speak about their group work. In addition, the remit was broadened to recognise the contribution of local authorities (LAs) to group work and a survey was carried out, with a number of interviews conducted with LAs. Information from the VAA interviews and LA survey has been used to inform this guide, although the nature of the project, which was designed to focus on VAAs, means that there is a larger amount of information about VAA group work, serving as examples and catalysts for national service development.

## WHY GROUP WORK?

Every year, several thousand children in the UK are adopted from care by people who are not family members. Approximately three-quarters of those children will be aged between one and four, and nearly 20 per cent aged between five and nine. It could be argued that all of these children are likely to have some complex needs, not only because of possible neglect, abuse or pre-natal exposure to alcohol or drugs, and the attachment and separation issues they have experienced, but also because of the identity issues they face as they grow up in a family into which they were not born.

Support will be important for all of these children, in varying ways, as they come to terms with their adoptive status and with any issues this raises for them – which are likely to change as they grow and develop. This support can come from many different sources, including:

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*  The Sector Capacity Building Initative (SCB) was launched by the Department for Education in 2014, and overseen by the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA), with the aims of increasing VAA capacity and supporting their growth and development.

- the support of their adoptive family;

- post-adoption support by social workers, for instance, in undertaking life story work;

- support from therapists, counsellors and other professionals;

- group support, either formally or informally arranged.

We owe it to these children and families to provide all the support we can. Group support is one of the most powerful and impactful tools we have available.

## LEARNING FROM CURRENT GROUP WORK

This guide is written to distil the good practice issues from a number of children's groups and other projects whose staff volunteered to be interviewed. What became very clear during these interviews was that no group is the same. Every group interviewed had been set up with slightly different aims and objectives, and it was widely acknowledged that they had learnt from experience – from previous work, but also from listening to children and young people – and had refined aspects of their group in response to this. This means that no single, complete good practice model exists, as each group will depend on its members and individual situation. However, we have identified a range of good practice points, from a varied selection of groups undertaking imaginative and useful work, and these are presented in this guide, to provide inspiration for others working in this area.

Much of this work has been developed by staff with many years' experience in the adoption field, and often with therapeutic knowledge of the needs of children and families. What "works" has in almost all cases been defined by the feedback from adopted children and young people themselves, and also from their families, schools and others who have seen positive outcomes from their involvement in group activities with their adoption agency.

## DEFINITIONS OF GROUPS

It was clear from conducting interviews for this guide that the term "group" is applied widely and variously across the adoption support sector. This guide therefore covers a range of activities that bring together adopted children and young people – sometimes with, and sometimes without, their adoptive parents.

Groups working with adopted children usually have one or more of the objectives below:

● Providing a "safe space" for adopted children and young people to meet with one another, where they may also share experiences and gain insights and support.

● Providing access to leisure and creative activities that they might not be able to access in other parts of their lives.

● Focusing on a structured purpose that brings children and young people together for learning and life skills.

● Providing opportunities for consultation, ambassadorial roles and personal development, and to inform and improve adoption practice.

## AIMS OF GROUP WORK

Some groups were established with definite purposes – such as consultation, or to enable young people to act as ambassadors for other adopted young people by sharing their own feelings and experiences. Other groups were set up with more general aims of supporting and empowering children and young people, and it was decided to let the group members define how the group evolved. In all situations, staff were aware that in order to offer the flexibility and responsiveness that adopted children and young people needed, it was important to have a secure underpinning structure to the group that enabled participants to feel safe and supported. This was especially important as the group work was frequently targeted at families who were already experiencing problems, and the group was often part of a package of wider support.

## MEASURING SUCCESS IN GROUP WORK

Measuring success in group work is not easy, because there are often other factors at play. Many of these projects were working with the children or young people and their families before they started attending the groups, or had set up the groups to complement their existing work. Consequently, any outcomes had to be measured alongside their other work. But most projects asked for regular feedback from the children/young people (and their parents, where appropriate). This tended to take place either at the end of each group session, or through special consultation events held at the start or end of a new "round" of groups. This pattern of "evaluation" through regular feedback reflected what has been explored in related literature and research on children's groups (see Chapters 1 and 2 for more information).

## THE SCOPE OF THIS GUIDE

There is already a great deal of material available about how to run children's groups and many readers of this guide will have experience of social work or therapeutic work with adoptive families, or specialist youth work with young people. Therefore, this is not a "how to" guide about the day-to-day running of a group, but sets out to explore the range of possible purposes of groups, what they can achieve for children/young people, and the practical issues you need to consider if you are thinking of setting up group work with adopted children. The guide also highlights good practice from existing groups, presenting a range of key messages collected from the cumulative experience of those interviewed for this guide.

A number of case studies from a range of groups are included as an appendix. These have been selected to illustrate a variety of group objectives, memberships and operating conditions, and cover:

- AdCAMHS – East Sussex County Council/Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
- Faith in Families
- West London Adoption & Permanence Consortium Children's Group
- TalkAdoption North East
- The Adoptables, Coram

Space considerations mean that we are unable to show more than this snapshot of practice from the range of work being undertaken by many dedicated groups, but we hope this selection provides inspiration for what can be achieved.

Legislation quoted within this guide relates solely to England. However, the focus throughout the guide is on practical issues to do with group work, and will therefore be generally relevant UK-wide.

The term "participant" is used in this guide to describe children and young people who are taking part in groups. It does not necessarily mean that they are taking part in "participation" activities, in the frequently used terminology of children's rights and empowerment, and the use of consultation to develop and improve services.

# Chapter 3
# Why do group work?

The previous chapter identified the findings from research about the value of group work for adopted children and young people. This chapter looks at why it is important for anyone considering setting up a group to be very clear about what they are aiming to achieve with the group, what will be most relevant to their agency, what can be resourced and reliably sustained, and, most importantly, what will be beneficial and welcomed by the children and young people they are working with.

Groups for adopted children and young people are likely to offer some or all of the following opportunities to their participants:

- meeting others who are adopted – maybe for the first time;
- having fun – enjoying experiences and opportunities they may otherwise not have access to;
- making friends;
- receiving support from facilitators and each other;
- acting as ambassadors for other adopted young people;
- consulting and sharing information to improve agency practice;
- developing life skills and gaining confidence;
- developing a healthy sense of identity;
- gaining recognition for their achievements;
- strengthening relationships within the adoptive family.

Agencies will need to consider which of these outcomes they would like their group to focus on.

## VARIETY OF CURRENT WORK

In researching for this guide, it was interesting to discover how many different types of group activities there were for adopted children and young people, and how the staff delivering them were clear about the purpose of their work.

The survey of local authorities undertaken for this guide looked at whether they ran children's groups, and what objectives these had. Of a small response rate, 60 per cent were running groups, which were mostly well established and had been running for over a year. These authorities generally provided three or more groups, with approximately 21 per cent aimed at preschool-aged children, 15 per cent at primary-aged children, 47 per cent at later primary, and 15 per cent aimed at adolescents and under-18s. Of the 40 per cent that were not running groups, this was often described as due to a lack of staff capacity, or because they utilised/were looking into utilising other organisations to provide these.

The main opportunity that respondents felt their group/s offered to children centred on socialising, fun and developing a healthy and secure sense of identity (nearly 90 per cent). In contrast, only 24 per cent felt that their group offered an opportunity for adopted children and young people to share information and consult in order to improve professional practice. Only a few survey respondents felt that their groups offered opportunities for children and young people to take on an "ambassadorial role" for adopted young people.

In the case of VAAs, data were collected from interviews with those who came forwards to share information, rather than from a larger survey. The aims of the groups being run by the respondents seemed to be similar to those being run by LAs – with a number of VAAs offering groups for children to socialise, have fun and meet with other adopted children. A smaller percentage cited consultation and ambassadorial roles as their aims, although there were a couple whose whole focus was on this work.

Some respondents felt that because certain VAAs work primarily with "hard to place" children, they were more likely to be supporting families with complex problems, and may already be offering a more therapeutic service, whereas local authorities may be offering less intensive post-adoption support services. However, there were far-ranging examples of therapeutic group work within the statutory sector, of a CAMHS service delivering group work, and of VAA staff having previously run groups for adopted children with therapeutic elements in the statutory sector.

## CLARITY ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF OFFERING GROUP WORK

Anyone starting a new group will need to consider how clearly it will be defined before it starts working with its members, and how much scope there will be for children/young people to contribute to and develop its structure. However, having an overall purpose is helpful, for example, recognising whether your group will have a therapeutic role or whether

it will focus on offering activities and learning opportunities – or a mixture of these.

> *Through our therapeutic parenting programme and through our initial helpline for adopted young people, we recognised the need to offer specific support for children and young people, through group work. We have four identified national outcomes: to improve family relationships and reduce disruptions, to reduce the social isolation of young people and their families, to increase young people's skills, and to improve the integration of adoption into a wider sense of self. However, each of our projects starts with a steering group or advisory group of young people, who influence and shape our activities.*

> Sarah Skelton, national manager, TalkAdoption

The responses of children and young people are a valuable insight into how effectively a group is working. However, it can be quite difficult to collect specific comments from younger children, and as some group staff pointed out, their happy faces may be the best feedback you get. With older young people, they will often be very happy to publicise the benefits of the group to others.

> *Being an Adoptables Ambassador has been a big growth process for me, I would recommend it to anyone to come and join The Adoptables.*

> Gemma, 19, ambassador, The Adoptables

> *My main highlight would be probably doing all the conferences, meeting Edward Timpson, talking to the Department for Education, particularly because I was really trying to get a point across as to how education can be made so much easier for adopted people…What I take away is that I do have a voice and I can be confident in projecting it.*

> Kelsey, 17, ambassador, The Adoptables

> *Excited that people can understand what all of us have been through.*

> *Comfortable about meeting other adopted young people.*

> *Good to be able to share experiences.*

> Feedback from young people attending TalkAdoption groups

> *Means a lot for our son to mix with adopted children as it is important he feels part of a normal society.*

> Parent of child who attended adopted young persons event run by Bury, Rochdale and Oldham local authorities

## MEETING DEMAND

In response to our survey, a small number of local authorities felt that there was no demand for groups.

*We tried to set up a youth group. Having liaised with our youth workers and found a venue, we advertised via our newsletter over a period of a few months. However, in this time we only had two responses.*

It would be wrong to draw any form of conclusion from this one comment, but there may be a number of reasons why some groups do not receive good responses. Some group workers will argue that any group takes time to establish and you have to persevere, whereas others will say that sometimes the structure of a group is set too firmly and is not responsive to young people's actual needs. There may also be issues such as not "pitching" the publicity for the group appropriately, or not choosing the right venue or time of day. It is to avoid these kinds of issues that some agencies have set up activity events for adoptive families and used these as a way of meeting young people who can contribute to a steering group or consultation event – before they attempt to create a group.

## EVALUATING THE BENEFITS OF GROUP WORK

When asked how they evaluated the success of their groups, staff often pointed to feedback from children, young people and adoptive parents, to annual or occasional consultation events with participants, or to something as simple as the fact that the children and young people said they had enjoyed themselves, and were keen to continue coming to the group. A number were providing regular feedback to managers or funders, and it was common for staff running groups to get together to evaluate individual sessions, or a previous programme of groups.

It is probably fair to say that groups that were unresponsive to the needs of their members would not be able to continue for long. Attending and participating in a group is voluntary by nature, and it is reasonably safe to speculate that any group that is continuing to run, to receive positive feedback, and to regularly attract children and young people to return, is delivering something of value to its members.

The AdCAMHS service created for adopted children and young people and their families through a partnership between East Sussex County Council and Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust evaluated the effectiveness of their service, in order to secure funding. An important element of this therapeutic service was their group work with young people.

The main themes in the feedback from children and young people included:

- *Not to be given a label – because this encouraged a sense of identity.*

- *Having a safe and separate venue away from parents and teachers.*

- *Wanted more therapy and to be able to come back if needed.*

- *They liked group activities.*

- *Felt less alone and different, after being in a group.*

- *Wanted opportunities to have more friends.*

The group also recognises that there are many individual outcomes – often broader than you might anticipate:

*Through our group activities with children and young people, we've seen many positives such as increased confidence, improved peer relationships and less or no self-harm from members, and positive changes at school. Young people also show a real desire to come back and engage in other activities, a willingness to help others and an interest in supporting other adopted young people. We've also seen young people take more of a political interest and wanting to have a voice.*

*One big piece of feedback we've had is that they [the children and young people] share a common goal of wanting to have friends. We have numerous smiley faces at the end of the group, because young people who initially felt isolated, reported feeling more connected.*

Alison Roy, professional lead for child and adolescent psychotherapy, CAMHS, East Sussex and AdCAMHS

The following list, whilst by no means definitive, sets out the main reasons why agencies felt that their groups were achieving something worthwhile.

- Children and young people continued to come to the groups.

- Participants wanted to stay on or become volunteers once they "outgrew" the group.

- Positive feedback was given, both formally and informally.

- There were noticeable improvements in a child or young person's confidence.

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- Children and young people made friends – perhaps for the first time.

- Unlikely friendships were built, simply through the bond of shared experience of adoption.

- Children and young people were better able to identify and talk about their feelings.

- There were improved relationships within families.

- Parents could see their children succeed and take pride in their achievements.

- Children and young people had new experiences that they might normally be excluded from because of behavioural issues.

- Children and young people gained increased life skills and discovered new talents and interests.

- Participants felt valued because they had shared their views through consultation and recognised that this would make a difference to other adopted children.

> *Our ID group has worked with children from 8 up to 18 – it meets once a month for a couple of hours and it's run by workers from our Participation and Rights Scheme. This work is constantly evaluated – there's feedback from the young people and the worker feeds that back to me. So it's a constant and ongoing process, and we make changes accordingly. Children won't come to groups if they're not feeling engaged.*

> Sara Mathison, adoption care co-ordinator,
> East Riding Adoption Team

## LONG-TERM BENEFITS

Clearly there will be some outcomes that are very difficult to measure, because they may only be noticeable a long time in the future. These could include children's ability to make lasting friendships and relationships, and the way they parent their own children. A group also gives children and young people the opportunity to benefit from one another's experiences, without having to undergo the negative aspects of these. So, for example, young people who are thinking of contacting their birth families may learn from discussions with other young people who have already done so, and may consequently approach this with greater awareness and forethought. Despite their intangibility, these are also outcomes that need to be borne in mind when deciding whether and how to run children's groups.

*I was walking down the road recently and a huge man rushed up to me and picked me up. 'Mica, Mica, Mica,' he said, 'Do you remember me? The Families Group! When I was young. I don't know what would have happened to me if it hadn't been for you and that group.'*

Mica May, therapist who undertook group and individual work with adopted children

## RECOGNISING THE IDENTITY OF THE GROUP

When you decide to undertake any project with a group of adopted young people, you need to recognise that the support that children and young people offer to each other may at times outweigh other aspects initially envisaged. This may seem obvious, but it can sometimes be overlooked in the enthusiasm to achieve an outcome, particularly in a group that is producing an identified product such as a brochure, short film, exhibition, newsletter, campaign or report. This may especially be the case if you are working alongside people who may not be so aware of the complex needs of some of the young people in the group. You may need to remind them that the wishes of the group as a whole need to be respected, and that young people will soon notice if they feel that any of their peers are not being valued or that their contributions are not being fully included.

*Sometimes when you work with groups on a particular activity, you have a goal in mind and you and your colleagues have envisaged the way in which the young people will achieve this, but then you realise that the young people are a lot more interested in being together, and supporting each other, and your goal isn't their goal. I've come across situations where the young people want to include something that doesn't fit in with what you'd planned, or doesn't meet the "standard" you had fixed in your head. You have to challenge yourself and ask, 'Who is this for? Am I getting fixated on having a really professional-looking outcome, and overlooking the feelings and wishes of the participants?' I once had a young person tell me he'd withdraw support from the group if I didn't listen properly to what young people were trying to tell me, and I needed to understand that their priorities were different from mine. It was a very helpful experience that I have never forgotten.*

Henrietta Bond, communications trainer, specialising in adoption, fostering and care leaver issues