Making good assessments

A PRACTICAL RESOURCE GUIDE

Pat Beesley

Revised by **Mary Lucking**

coramBAAF
ADOPTION & FOSTERING ACADEMY

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* BAAF ceased to exist on 31 July 2015, with some services now being delivered by CoramBAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy, part of the Coram Group.

Note about the authors

Pat Beesley worked for many years as a Consultant and Trainer in BAAF's North East England team. Her professional background includes social work in generic, hospital and children's mental health teams as well as extensive experience as a social worker and manager in fostering and adoption. Her expertise in assessment stems from her wide experience of preparing, assessing and supporting adoptive parents and foster carers as well as training in these areas.

Mary Lucking joined BAAF as a Consultant in BAAF's Development Team in 2014, seconded from the Department for Education, where she was Assistant Director for Adoption, responsible for policy on domestic and intercountry adoption and special guardianship. Mary and her team at the Department for Education developed the adoption policies that accompany the Children and Families Act 2014, and prior to that implemented policy changes, including the extension of priority school access to children adopted from care (or leaving care under special guardianship and child arrangement orders), the two-stage adopter assessment and approval process, and streamlining panel arrangements.

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MODULE 7

Involving children of the family in the assessment

Assessing applicants with children: involving children of the family in the assessment

Fostering or adoption has a significant impact on the lives of children already in the family. Those children may be birth children, or those who are part of the family through kinship care, adoption or fostering. Research indicates that children express a range of feelings about the experience. For some, it is a maturing and beneficial experience; for others, it is difficult and upsetting with some feeling that their own needs have been neglected. Some children worry about their parents/carers and their new sibling's behaviour towards them. The principle of thorough preparation and support applies as much to children in the family as it does to applicants, and a lack of good preparation can lead to placements running into difficulties. Selwyn *et al* (2015) found that 'Most parents [in the study] recalled little or no engagement at all between their existing children and the social worker'. Earlier adoption studies have indicated that the existence of birth children in the family is associated with an increased risk of poorer outcomes (Parker, 1999). Research on the impact of birth children whose family are adopting is still limited. Some agencies can be risk averse and there have been those who have refused to accept any prospective adopters with birth children. With secondary infertility, this would rule out a large number of prospective adopters. Quinton *et al*'s study (1998, p 229) on placing older children for permanence suggests that the formation of a new sibling group can be a difficult and challenging business.

Most parents will have had early discussions with their children. Some may decide not to proceed with an application because of concerns for their children. Others will only wish to pursue an application confident that their child or children support them. In many cases, the children of the family will have only a limited knowledge of what fostering or adoption will mean for them and their families. As they learn more about it, more questions and concerns may surface.

Involving children appropriately in the assessment process is a complex piece of work that should be planned to meet the particular needs of the family. Argent (2014) suggests two techniques for involving the wider family, including children, in the preparation: a child appreciation day and a family day. Creativity, an understanding of child development, sensitivity to how the child may be thinking and feeling, and how to listen to children are skills the worker will need. The worker must accept any views the child raises as valid: they may need more time to consider with their parents and the worker, or it may be that the application has to be deferred.

The social worker should meet the child or children at the outset of the assessment, and discuss with applicants how their children will be involved in the process. It will be important to ensure that the child and parents understand the purpose of the child's involvement. Broadly speaking, the focus is on preparing the child for a placement, listening to their views, assessing their strengths and vulnerabilities, and ensuring that they have access to appropriate support. There may be many questions, spoken and unspoken, that reflect an underlying concern about the impact another child could have on their role and relationships within the family. Bridget Betts' DVD, *Just a Member of the Family* (2005), and Jean Camis' *We Are Fostering* (2003) are useful resources that cover many of the questions and concerns that children may have, as well as addressing other matters they need to consider. A guide for children,

Adopting a Brother or Sister (Argent, 2010), explains, in child-friendly language, what this means. Younger children may also find *Nutmeg gets a Little Sister* (Foxon, 2007) a helpful introduction to the issues.

Building rapport and a relationship of trust will enable the child to share more freely their thoughts and feelings. The child needs to feel accepted and valued – keeping appointments and arriving on time convey a message to children that they are important to the worker. Some children feel comfortable expressing themselves through play, others through drawing or stories, others through talking. It will be helpful if the social worker has a variety of materials – toys, books, drawing and writing materials, games, etc – to ease the communication. The plan of work, taking into consideration age and understanding, will need to be creative and involve different methods and tools.

Some agencies provide group preparation sessions for children of applicants, which can help them understand what adoption/fostering will mean in their lives and explore their wishes and feelings. The social worker will need to plan their intervention taking into account earlier preparation, the number of children in the family and their ages and level of understanding. Children may be involved in some sessions with their parents and others on their own, or as a sibling group if there is more than one child. It is important to ensure that each child is seen individually (age appropriately) and is given ample opportunity to freely express her/his wishes and feelings and to ask questions.

It will be important to consider significant events in the child's life and any factors that could increase vulnerability, for example, the transition from primary to secondary school. In some cases, this might indicate a need to delay the assessment. Occasionally, as the worker gets to know a child better, they may feel that the child's lack of resilience or sense of security indicates that adoption or fostering would not be in their interests at this particular time. If an applicant is already an adoptive parent or foster carer, the worker will need to take into account the adopted/fostered child's history, current relationships within the family, and readiness to accept a sibling (see BAAF Practice Note 54, *Assessing Second-Time Adopters*, noting that, for applicants in England, the process for assessing second-time adopters has been significantly shortened but these timescales should not preclude the worker suggesting that the family takes some time out or taking longer so that they are reassured that the timing is right for the existing child).

Assessors may want to use a board game, *Welcome to our Family* (Chapman, 2012, available from CoramBAAF), designed for use with families, with children, hoping to foster. The game is a fun way of engaging children in that process and a means of gaining information from the family that can be used in the assessment reports.

The work with the child or children at this stage can inform later matching. The children's needs and views should be considered alongside those of their parent(s), and consideration should be given to key research findings on placement-related factors and outcomes (Quinton *et al*, 1998; Rushton *et al*, 2001). Social workers and applicants need to consider how they will help children keep themselves safe, bring to the attention of their parents any concerns they may have, and continue to be consulted on how fostering or adoption is fitting into their lives.

Social workers will need to be sensitive to the particular needs of different groups of children and families. The extent to which children share in the discussions of adults may vary depending on the family's cultural background and what is deemed appropriate or not. The worker should understand the different issues arising from ethnicity, culture, language and religion and be aware of and prepared to accept "difference". They must be sensitive to factors such as their own ethnicity and gender, which might potentially create barriers. When working with a disabled child, the worker's awareness of their own perceptions and understanding about disability, as well as being able to use different ways of communicating, will be important.

There will be other situations, for example, where a relative child is joining the family, when the worker will need to consider particular factors that might impact on the children of the family: a cousin or an infant niece may become a new sister; there may be a shift in family relationships and dynamics, for instance, who in the extended family can visit the home; information about family members that might previously have been shared without thought becomes confidential. In the case of a child adopted from overseas, children in the family will need to be aware of particular cultural issues and be prepared for the possibility of discrimination and prejudice.

There may be children in the extended family who are frequent visitors to the home, or with whom the applicants have a lot of contact. The social worker will need to consider to what extent they should be involved. As a minimum, they will need to understand what changes to expect and how they might be affected by them, as well as knowing how to keep themselves safe and how to talk to an adult if they have any concerns. There is a helpful case study (Argent, 2014, pp 58–61) that sets out how a wider family group, including nieces and nephews, were involved in the assessment, and how they subsequently helped support the placement. *When Daisy met Tommy* (Belle, 2010), a story of how six-year-old Daisy and her parents adopted Tom, shows how applicants explained adoption to their birth daughter.

By the end of the assessment, and contingent on the child's age and understanding, the social worker should be satisfied that:

- the child of the family understands what adoption/fostering is and what their parents are hoping to do;
- the child understands the backgrounds, needs and possible behaviours of children who need permanent care;
- they know what the child's wishes and feelings are in relation to the application;
- they understand the relationship the child has with each parent, their attachments and sense of security, and their experiences of being parented;
- for a sibling group, they understand the relationship between the individual child and each of their siblings, and the likely impact on the sibling relationships of another child joining the family;
- they have explored sufficiently with the child the impact on their life of having another child in the family, including how they will manage their own feelings and behaviour;
- they understand the child's strengths and vulnerabilities and the implications for placement and support;
- the child is able to keep themselves safe;
- the child will be able to express their needs, wishes and feelings when another child is placed and into the future;

- they understand the implications of the above for matching with another child or children.
- They have accepted any views the child raised as valid, and that those views are clearly part of the recommendation.
- If the child has raised safeguarding concerns, they have taken appropriate action.

In an exceptional situation, the social worker may, in the course of working with a child, develop concerns about the child's welfare and safety. They must be familiar with local child protection procedures and draw any concerns to the attention of the appropriate authorities. In such a situation, the assessment is unlikely to proceed.

SIBLINGS IN ADOPTIVE AND FOSTER HOMES

Preparing children for a new sibling

- Ensure that each child understands that they have a voice, that it will be heard and their views taken into account. The social worker must feel confident that children are able to express views of their own even if different from those of their parents. When the child's view differs from that of the parents, consider carefully the implications of this for placement.
- Explore with each child the picture they have of the child who is to join the family. Recognise that some children will have hopes and wishes as well as fears and fantasies about this child.
- Help children to have a realistic understanding and expectations of the child who is to join the family. Help them to consider and understand the different behaviours they might encounter in another child and how they might react to these.
- Remember that it may be more difficult for a single child to adjust to sharing their lives and their parents with another child. Consider the possibility of jealousy and resentment. Help the child to practise sharing through the use of different scenarios.
- Consider ways in which the child can preserve a sense of identity and separateness; this may be through attending a different school, maintaining leisure pursuits, and their own friendships.
- Work with parents to devise strategies to ensure that they can divide their time and attention so that the existing child does not feel left out.
- Consider how to promote the new sibling relationship. This will include helping parents to devise ways in which they help the children build a new relationship, which might include joint activities inside and outside the home. Support workers could plan fun activities with the children that involve sharing, taking turns and problem solving. ■

Shelagh Beckett's practice guide, *Beyond Together or Apart: Planning for, assessing and placing sibling groups* (2018) explores the importance of sibling relationships and how to plan accordingly to make the best placements for brothers and sisters.

Examples of resources for working with children in the family

GENERAL

- A bag of varied, interesting objects that the child can sort through – can generate reactions that you can pursue together
- A diary of daily events – using pictures, cards
- A memory box – containing bits and pieces that are important symbolically to the child
- Playdough, plasticine, paints, paper, magazines, stickers, glitter, coloured ribbons, glue sticks, scissors

HISTORY

- Life path
- Flowchart
- Written story
- Map
- Doll's house

WHO'S WHO

- Ecomap
- Family tree/genogram
- Candles exercise

FEELINGS

- Smiley faces
- Glove puppets
- Cushion for punching
- Paper balls, small bean bags for throwing
- Role play
- Word and picture cards
- Empty chair
- Telephones
- Drawing, painting
- Sentence completion
- Worksheets
- Smelly box

REAL BROTHERS AND SISTERS

Reproduced from *Be My Parent*, May, 2008

Hedi Argent is an independent family placement consultant, trainer and author. In this article, she talks about the impact on birth children of adoptive or foster siblings joining the family, and stresses the importance of good preparation for adults and children alike.

All children have mixed feelings when the anticipated arrival of a new baby is announced, and the reality of this new little person often doesn't live up to expectations. Children have to learn their first hard lesson in how to share their parents, their space and their belongings. When their initial curiosity has been satisfied, and the excitement has given way to not getting the attention they have been used to, many an older child has asked their mother to take the baby 'back to the shop'.

Whatever the family structure, however many children, and whichever culture they adhere to, most biological siblings share lifelong relationships that may range from intimate and loving to distant and resentful. But how are sibling relationships formed and affected when children are added to the family not by birth but by adoption or permanent foster care?

Many children profiled in family-finding magazines or websites are well past infancy and have had negative experiences quite unlike what their soon-to-be new siblings have known. These children most probably come with a distorted understanding of the world, a confused sense of identity and low self-esteem. They will certainly have accumulated many losses along the way if they have been separated from parents, friends and family. If they are to be placed together with some or all of their siblings, they may bring their own "united front" or troubled relationships with them. It is a fallacy that children who go through adversity together will necessarily forge strong bonds; they are just as likely to scrap like puppies over a bone, if this is all that they have been metaphorically used to.

It can be very hard for birth children to welcome siblings with a pre-existing relationship into their home. Sometimes it is easier if brothers and sisters are placed one by one, in order to mimic the biological way of building a family. When children are placed on their own, they may transfer familiar patterns of sibling behaviour to their new sisters and brothers. A boy, who was always picked on by his birth brothers, may provoke his adoptive or foster brother to become the aggressor; a girl who was praised for spying on her older birth sisters, may tell tales about her new sister in order to gain favour from the adults. It can be distressing for the birth children of adopters and permanent foster carers to become embroiled in behaviour that they cannot understand, especially if this includes sexually inappropriate behaviour.

Prospective adoptive and foster siblings, relative to their age and understanding, need as much preparation and support as their parents do. It is generally accepted that good training and preparation for permanent carers are the cornerstones of good placements, and that the birth children play an important part in this process. Most agencies include them in at least some of the group and home study sessions, and encourage the parents to share and discuss the adoption plan with their children even before they make an application.

Too often, parents hope that an adopted child will be a companion for their only birth child, and that the nearer they are in age, the closer they will become. But children who have not had enough love, attention, food or protection, are rarely ready to share, to be loyal or to give and take; they may not even know how to play or to understand what is theirs and what belongs to another child. They may need to learn how to attach securely to an adult, before they can relate appropriately to their own age group. This can cause added difficulties for birth children.

Preparing birth children for the reception of a specific child or sibling group requires skilled direct work. It is not a one-off interview or a chat when they come home from school. It should be a planned programme of work, with the aims and content agreed by the parents. Some sessions could include all the children as well as their parents, but each child ought to have the opportunity to be heard on his or her own. Birth children are not "a package deal", as one boy said after the family placement worker had seen three children together and assumed that they all shared the positive opinions of the assertive older sister.

There can be no format for this work. Every circumstance will be unique and require individual attention. The lengths and frequency of sessions will vary according to the number and ages of the children in the permanent family, the number and ages of the children to be placed, and the previous experiences of all concerned. Like all direct work with children, it should involve more than talking. Family circles are a good way to start: who is in them and how do you open them up to include a newcomer? Why do some children need new families? How can children belong to two families and how can two family trees grow together?

Making lists of rules that children should abide by, naming emotions, and using role play to practice dealing with situations, will all give some idea of a child's deeper feelings and of their resilience. What do you say to your friends about getting a new brother "half grown"? What is different and what is the same about building a family by adoption? What kind of problems might there be? What do you expect, wish for, fear or pretend? How does love grow?

Adult children, who no longer live at home, should not be excluded either: on the one hand, they can have strong views about being replaced by a "second family" or about having unwelcome responsibilities foisted upon them; on the other, they may offer an invaluable contribution to making a placement succeed.

No matter how hard we try, it is not possible to prepare everyone for everything. Adopters repeatedly tell us that they didn't know how it would really be until they were actually doing it so how could children know? Good support and a forum for children to express their views must follow good preparation. The work with birth children should not be a frill added on to an adoption or fostering package, but an integral part of the process. A number of permanent placements disrupt because that work has been perfunctory. Clearly, to work with birth children properly is both costly and time consuming, but it should never be a question of 'Can we afford the resources?' It should always be a question of 'Can we afford not to find the resources?' ■

Communicating with children

Reproduced from *Preparing Children for Permanence*, Romaine *et al*, 2007, pp38–40

Verbal communication

Looked after children and young people tend to meet many adults who ask them many questions. Some children will have had a number of social workers, and this can mean having to retell their story repeatedly, which can be wearisome and

distressing. New social workers and carers should demonstrate by listening and positively responding that it will be worthwhile to trust once more.

A nine-year-old told me that 'Before a social worker starts telling me important things about my life, they should at least get to know me'. This reminded me that the first stage of communicating is listening.

As a social worker I wasn't trained in communicating with children. I learnt about advocacy, empowerment and children's rights, but it seemed to be taken for granted that the art of communication was a skill that I already possessed. Communicating with children, from my own experience, is a most complex and demanding area of work. Strategies employed to share information, give explanations and elicit thoughts and feelings have to be developed over time, and inspiration must be allowed to come from a variety of sources.

Personal communication from child's social worker

Listening to children/talking with children

- Listen patiently to what the child or young person is saying, even though you may consider it to be unrelated or misconceived. The child will be imparting what, from his perspective, is relevant and real. Indicate simple acceptance, not necessarily agreement, by nodding or perhaps injecting an occasional 'mm-hmm' or 'I see'.
- Ask open questions. These often start with 'Tell me about…school/living here/last week…' Open questions work well when you are getting to know the child, at the beginning of a session, during or following free play or if you feel the work is getting "blocked".
- Getting "blocked" describes times when the conversation is repetitive, circular or stalled. You can try saying: 'I notice that when we talk about this you often say "so what" or "I'm not going to" (or whatever the young person says to block the discussion). What else could happen? How can you and I change things so that we can think about this differently?'
- Try to understand the feelings the child is expressing. You can ask at times how the child feels about what is being discussed.
- Restate some of the child's phrases so the child can elaborate or re-phrase, if helpful. Do not put words into the child's mouth or interpret what he or she is saying. Simply act as a mirror – reflect back.
- Allow time for the child to talk without interruption if he or she wants to. Take your cue from the child about when to join in and when to stop.
- Try to get clarification when this is appropriate – 'So from what you just said, am I right in thinking that…?' or 'So how did you feel about that?'
- Use closed up questions when you are aiming to elicit answers to specific questions. Closed questions require answers like 'yes', 'no' or 'because…' You can also use closed questions when a child or young person is avoiding or "waffling". Bear in mind that closed questions can be threatening so use them sparingly. Do not use them routinely in your work with the child or at the start of a session.

- Listen out for what is not being said. For instance, a young person with little experience of nurturing care may describe school life, family events and friendships without reference to emotions.
- If the child "slips in" a piece of information or a thought that is important and quickly moves on to something else, you can easily return to it with a simple 'I heard you say…just now', or 'What was it you just said about…?'
- If the child asks for your views, be honest but sensitive in your reply.
- Do not talk about yourself. Do not relate what the child is saying to your own experiences ('I remember when something similar happened to me…'). If you have genuinely been in a similar situation (for example, in care), it may be helpful in terms of unblocking a piece of work to use this, but do it with caution, be clear why you are doing it and what, in your view, will be gained by it. It is generally not a useful tool for establishing a relationship with a child. Giving a child or young person sensitive personal information passes on a responsibility the child could probably do without. If things get difficult between you, the information could be used by the child to make you feel uncomfortable.
- Do not get emotionally involved yourself in the child's story.
- Try simply to understand. Analysis comes later.

Tolerating silences

Silences can indicate:

- boredom;
- embarrassment;
- not knowing or understanding what's going on;
- not knowing what to expect;
- sizing you up;
- "winding" you up;
- repressing strong emotions;
- thinking;
- being overwhelmed by the situation;
- wanting to be somewhere else (football game/ favourite TV programme);
- getting prepared to tell you something;
- remembering things that happened last time;
- avoiding discussion;
- being tired.

Pacing/emotional listening

Pacing is a technique of acknowledging a child's emotions – of helping them to be in touch with and express feelings – without being overwhelmed by them. Sometimes, in order for us to feel emotionally "heard", we need the other person to respond to our emotional high with an increased momentum of their own. What then often happens in an argument is that each person tops the other's emotional level so that the tension escalates. In the context of "emotional listening", the technique is the opposite.

The young person may provoke you initially to match the pace and energy he or she is using to express intense feelings. You should not match feeling with feeling, but rather simply heighten the pace at which you talk and exaggerate your facial expressions while you listen and respond. Then quite quickly reduce your pace in stages, with the aim of helping to decelerate tension.

This technique is the opposite of having an argument – each of your communications should be aimed at having slightly less momentum than that of the child. If this is effective, the child will gradually relax without feeling unheard. ■

Factors to consider when there are children in the family

By Maureen Burns, Trainer Consultant, BAAF

Pre-school children

- Who is the main attachment figure for the child? What happens when they are separated?
- Is the child able to accept comfort from other key figures?
- How does the child seek comfort?
- How does the child respond to the parent comforting another child?
- How does the child handle sharing
  - their space?
  - their parent/s?
  - their relatives?
  - their friends?

  NB consider this in own and other environments
- How does the child share? Do they do so freely or do they need encouragement?
- How does the child get attention?
- What is the child's regular routine? How would this change if another child joined the family?
- How does the child cope with change?
- How does the child express emotions?
- How does the child mix with other children in different environments?
- How does the child cope with noise?
- How does the child respond to difficult behaviour displayed by other children?
- How would you describe the child's personality?
- What are the child's strengths? Vulnerabilities?

School-aged children

All the above plus:

- Is the child achieving educationally? If not, why not?
- What support does the child need in relation to any special needs? How might this change and how might the child respond to changes?
- How does the child respond to children/adults who are different?
- What does the child feel about having a sibling?
- How do they get along with other children? Any differences between boys/girls?
- How important is it to them to be the same as others?
- What do they understand about adoption/fostering?

- What do they think about why children get adopted/fostered?
- How do they cope with children who break the rules?
- How have they coped with staying away overnight? Other children staying over with them?
- How do they deal with competition?
- How do they handle failure?
- How does the child handle conflict?
- How does the child handle physical contact?
- What does the child understand about unkindness?
- How does the parent teach the child about:
  - personal safety?
  - boundaries?
  - socialising?
  - difference?
- How does the parent respond to the child's questions about the world?
- What are the family rules and routines? How will they change when another child joins the family? How will the parent help the child to adapt to the changes?
- How have they explored the idea of fostering or adopting a child with their own child? ■

Key points

- The involvement of children in the family is a necessary part of the assessment of prospective adoptive parents and foster carers.
- The main purposes of involving children are to prepare them for fostering/adoption, to assess their strengths and vulnerabilities, to listen to them and include their views in the assessment, and to support them.
- The work undertaken with children in the family cannot be prescribed. It will depend on the number of children, their age and understanding, and consideration of the most effective way to engage them.
- The social worker should build a relationship based on children's rights to be heard, to be kept safe and to be respected.
- The worker must be alert to any safeguarding issues and be familiar with their agency's safeguarding procedures.
- Particular attention should be given to children in the family who are adopted or fostered, their relationships within the family, and the possible vulnerability or insecurity they might experience.
- The needs and views of all members of the family should be taken into account when matching for placements.

EXERCISES

Exercises to use with applicants' children

PARENT MESSAGES

A selection of these messages can be printed on cards to use with applicants' children. The children can select cards that match their own experiences of being parented. The cards can also be used in conjunction with a case study to help children consider some of the messages that children in care may have received from their parents or carers.

Sample parent messages

You're smart	I'll be glad when you grow up and get out of here
You're stupid	You can trust yourself to know what you need
Be happy	I (parent) need to know how you feel so I can make the best decisions for the family
Feelings are OK	I need you to help take care of…
You're unlovable	It's sinful to be angry at your parents
My needs come first	I won't pay attention to you no matter what you do
I knew you could do it	I wish you were a boy rather than a girl
Don't have fun	I'm glad you're part of our family
I love you	You can never pay me back for all I've done for you – but keep trying
I'm glad you're a girl	Expect others, not me, to take care of you
Please others	Don't tell your…(mother, father)
I like your hugs	Parenting is a difficult and unrewarding job
You're my favourite child	It's OK for parents to hurt children
Solve your own problems	Think the way I tell you to think
Boys are better than girls	Anything worthwhile is worth suffering for
It's OK to ask for help	If at first you don't succeed try, try again
You're just like me	You can count on me to know what is happening
I like to touch you	I'll pay more attention to you if you're bad than if you're good

I'm afraid of your anger	If only you'd learn to think
It's OK to be scared	You're a busy child
You are lovable	He (she) is our slow one
Parents make mistakes	I like to watch you try new things
Girls are better than boys	I like the way you pay attention
Problem child	There's no excuse for a bad mood
I want you to stay young	Bring all of your problems to me, I'll solve them
You'll never succeed	You act wild
You can succeed	Be successful
You're perfect	I wish you were a girl rather than a boy
Don't brag	If you lie you can get out of things
It's OK to make mistakes	Why can't you be more like your…(brother, sister, etc)
Are you still here?	If you beg or whine you can usually get your own way
Work before play	You drive me to drink (drugs, etc)
You're messy	You don't have to be perfect
Nothing is secret	I wish you hadn't been born
Don't feel	Hurry up and grow up
Why can't you learn to do things for yourself?	Your needs aren't important. Don't expect others to take care of you
You're crazy	If it's fun it must be immoral
You're so slow	I enjoy watching you grow up
Teenagers are the pits	I'm scared of your sadness
You come last	I have time enough for all of you
Parents are consistent	Children are to be seen and not heard
Why can't you do anything right?	Everyone makes mistakes sometimes
I'm glad you're a boy	You keep on like that and you'll end up in prison
You can trust your own feelings	I wish someone else were my child instead of you
I don't have time for you	Money is more important than love
When you're lonely come and be close	If something goes wrong it must be your fault
I enjoy you	Girls don't have to be clever

You come first	I always have time for you
I like you to touch me	You have to cheat to get anything out of life
Poor thing	Parents are inconsistent
I like parenting	I never have time for you
It's OK to be angry	Won't you ever learn?
You're in charge	I don't want to know what you are doing
I'm glad you're my child	Play before work
Work can be fun	You have a big mouth
You meet my needs	You're a good kid
I need you to comfort me	Drop dead
Make me look good as a parent	Goofed again
You're driving me crazy	Mind your own business
You can trust me	You're beautiful
You never learn	Why don't you find something else to do?
I hate you	

Fahlberg, 1994, pp 370–371

A COAT OF ARMS

Give applicants' children a large piece of paper, pens, stickers, old magazines and glue, and ask them to create a family coat of arms. The aim of this exercise is to create something that gives a sense of the uniqueness of this family; it could contain a family motto, reflect family members' interests and achievements, family rules, etc.

CREATING A "THIS IS US" ALBUM

Children being placed with a new family can find it helpful to be given a "this is us" album about the household, either before they move into the family or when they first arrive. This can be useful as part of introductions to the new family. This is an exercise that the adoptive family can do together, or it can also be used as an exercise that the social worker undertakes with the applicants' children. Encourage the family to use a variety of materials and ways of giving information to make the album come alive.

The album should provide basic information about members of the family that will help a new child to get to know the family and the home. Names and photographs of family members, any pets and relatives or important family friends who visit regularly should be included. Photographs of the house, the child's bedroom, the garden, the local school and the family are also helpful. Details can be added that bring the family to life, for example, the names of family members and their interests

and hobbies. If there are other children placed in the family, some information (agreed with them) will be helpful. Add a description of basic family routines, relationships and patterns.

The album could include a simple explanation of what makes an adoptive or foster family. This can be a useful way to ascertain the extent to which children understand the nature of adoption or fostering.

Romaine M *et al*, 2007, p 19

JOINT STORYTELLING

Joint storytelling can be a way of engaging with children about their history, their feelings and what might happen when their family becomes an adoptive or foster family. It can be used with children aged three to 12 and can be simple or more detailed according to age.

Ask the child to choose his or her favourite animal and give it a name. Then start telling a story about the animal that echoes the child's own story. After a few sentences, ask the child to continue with the story. This will give the child a chance to share his or her perceptions of past events and how he or she felt about them, which may affect what happens in the future. After the child has added a few sentences, you can continue the story again and take the opportunity to concentrate on areas about which the child might feel hesitant, anxious or have only just considered, for example, what might happen once a child is placed with their family.

Adapted from Romaine *et al*, 2007, p 68

EXPRESSING FEELINGS – REPRESENTATIONAL WORK

Children usually enjoy activities such as paper-plate drawing – making happy, sad or angry faces, etc. You can use the paper-plate faces for the child to show how he or she is feeling at the start of a particular session, or they can be used when sharing with the child various scenarios of life with an adoptive/foster brother or sister.

Adapted from Romaine *et al*, 2007, p 68

USING QUESTIONNAIRES

This can be presented as a set of questions or unfinished sentences, which the child can answer, react to and discuss. This exercise can be useful for children who may be cautious about sharing feelings. The statements can start off being quite neutral:

'My favourite TV programme is…'

'My favourite colour is…'

and become more focused:

'My favourite person is…'

'The person I like least is…'

'What makes me happy is…'

'What makes me sad is…'

'When I think about fostering I…'

'When I first meet the child I will probably feel…'

'Some of the things I think will be good about fostering/adoption are…'

'Some of the things I think will be bad about fostering/adoption are…'

and so on.

This activity can help children to express themselves and become more confident in making statements that are negative as well as positive, both about themselves and about other people and situations.

Children who enjoy drawing may like to use a whole page of paper for each question, with the heading 'This is me' or 'These things make me happy/sad', to draw how they see themselves or think others see them.

The questionnaire can be developed into a booklet, with the child being encouraged to illustrate it with their own drawings, photos and stickers. This is something that the child can revisit and add to during support visits.

Adapted from Romaine *et al*, 2007, p 69

OTHER EXERCISES

- Sculpting with stones. Ask the child to identify a stone to suit each family member and then explain why he or she has chosen each stone. Ask the child to place stones in spatial relationships to each other to indicate closeness of family relationships. (This exercise can also be done with soft toys.)
- Ask the child for photos and videos of him or herself at different ages. Ask what he or she was doing at that age. Relate this to the age and development of a child who may be placed with the family.
- Make up cards with situations on each, for example, 'What happens in your family when…?' or 'Who shouts at whom when…?'
- Role play. Ask the child to take the part of their mother or father, and role play different scenarios. For example: A child comes into the room and changes the TV channel – what happens next? Or: A teenager comes home half an hour later than agreed – what happens next? Create a number of different scenarios.
- Ask the child to think of ten rules that the family needs to tell the new child joining them.
- Ask the child to write a school report on his or her mother or father.
- Give the child permission to tell his or her parents how he or she is feeling after a child joins the family.

INTERVIEWING CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY

- Draw your own family doing something together.
- Draw your family after the new child arrives.
- Draw a good time in your family.
- Draw a bad time in your family.
- Draw a bad time after the new child comes.
- What will be the same?
- What will be different?
- What will be different between you and your mum/dad?
- How are you going to protect your precious things?
- How are you going to protect your time with your parents?
- How are you going to protect your time to yourself?

Explain – 'Sharing rooms can lead to problems. How do you keep your stuff safe?' Children may need something secure to keep things in.

Encourage the child, if possible, to prepare the new child for certain things, for example, what is the custom in this house if somebody gets angry?

Ideas from Claudia Jewett