

Chapter 4

Factors leading to disruption

Successful adoptions depend on good teamwork and the exercise of good judgement on the part of prospective adopters and social workers. Therefore, disruption is seldom the result of what one party has done or left undone. It is more often a combination of:

- risks that were not identified by the social work team (though often known to different individuals, but not gathered together and brought into focus for planning for adoption or post-adoption support);
- risks that were incorrectly assessed or underestimated (when pressure to meet legal, policy and agency timescales and to limit the damage known to stem from delay overrides other good practice considerations);
- risks that were unpredictable (when dynamics between children, families and social workers, or factors such as death or illness emerge that could not have been foretold from all the reports, meetings and court proceedings on which the adoption was based).

Families and children have to know from the beginning that, in spite of the most careful preparation, training, assessments, experience and knowledge, it is not possible to anticipate exactly what will happen when this child is placed with this family. Often we stand by and watch in respectful admiration as children and substitute parents, with incalculable effort and patience, make the most potentially problematic placements last. But together with the child and the parents, we also have to survive while seemingly promising adoptions crumble.

COMMON CAUSES OF DISRUPTION

- **Key information is incomplete or unshared** about the prospective parents or about the children and their birth families – possibly due to a well-intentioned but misguided attempt to present a positive picture and to avoid raising painful issues. Relevant facts can be withheld or missed.

If a child's history and memory are contained in children's services' records, then it is not acceptable if the social workers for the child, or the prospective family for that child, do not have the time or the opportunity to study them.

One prospective adopter at a disruption meeting complained about the child's profile featured in an agency family-finding leaflet. It was written that Jamie was good at dancing, riding his bike and roller-skating, and that he liked to draw – activities that would fit in well with the adopters' lifestyle. In actual fact, Jamie's dancing seemed to be highly sexualised, he could not roller-skate or ride a bike unaided, and he hated to draw. He said that he was made to draw by his previous foster carers. The social worker who wrote the profile did not know Jamie and had accepted unverified information.

It can be tempting for us to ask children what kind of family they want and what they like to do, rather than get to know the child: their concerns and fears, their understanding of family life, and the impact their experiences have had on their ability to convey their true wishes and feelings.

Workers believe they have communicated essential information, but it was ignored...Parents believe essential information was not given. Sometimes essential information was given but in such a way that it was not successfully communicated. For information to be successfully communicated, it must be both given and received.

(Donley Zeigler, 1996)

- **Inaccurate assessments of children's attachment patterns and the effects of trauma**, including attachments to foster carers, meaningful connections and continuity needs, losses and experience of abuse and neglect. It is important to try to imagine the "internal picture" of parents that a neglected or abused child is likely to carry into a long-term placement.

CASE EXAMPLE

Amanda's birth mother was unable to nurture and protect her effectively. The vacuum was filled by her father, but he sexually abused her. Amanda's survival strategy involved identifying with her father, despite her fear of abuse. She may have seen him as strong and in control, possibly affectionate, providing some care, and offering her a special "privileged" position. Her mother appeared, by contrast, as rejecting and weak, to be treated only with contempt. Although not aware of it, in her adoptive placement she tried to "see off" the mother and sibling rivals, as the only way of securing some kind of security and power. Letting go of these distorted relationship patterns was always going to be difficult for her, but a clearer assessment of them might at least have helped the adopters to understand what was happening. The adoption disrupted within a few months, after Amanda showed frightening aggression towards her adoptive mother and sister, while trying to share secrets with her adoptive father.

If a sexual abuse history is known or can be reasonably suspected before a child's placement, adopters should receive appropriate preparation and guaranteed access to services. There will be children with complex and perhaps not fully documented abuse histories where the possibility of past sexual abuse needs to be held in mind and inform work with the child within an adoption support plan.

(Hodges *et al*, 2003)

- **Failure to anticipate the relevance** of the prospective parents' life history and lifestyle to the experiences of specific children. The family may be unable to meet their own expectations when the placement triggers undisclosed or unrecognised problems.

CASE EXAMPLE

Ben and Elsa were a devoted, professional couple in their fifties, who were well prepared for adoption even before they approached an agency. They seemed to have come to terms with their childlessness. They were socially aware and concerned about the older children lingering in care. They were eager participants during training and open and co-operative during the home study.

Elsa had come to the UK as a child refugee and she and Ben were involved in refugee organisations. They felt, and their social worker agreed, as did the adoption panel in due course, that they had the right experience and attitude to parent an older traumatised child.

Zadie, aged 10, was placed with them following well planned and successful introductions. After a "honeymoon" period, she began to "commandeer" Ben and to reject Elsa. This echoed Elsa's own traumatic childhood when she was reunited with her estranged mother and rejected her. Elsa had been well prepared and could cope with Zadie's behaviour, but Ben could not accept Zadie's rejection of his beloved wife who had been so traumatised as a child. The adoption disrupted after six weeks.

- **The impact of changes in the family** such as sickness, death, divorce, pregnancy, or redundancy on adoption support needs.
- **Post-adoption depression**, like post-natal depression, can be a seriously debilitating condition, which may be masked by more obvious problems in a placement.
- **A failure of therapeutic, health and education services** to meet an expected need, usually when adoptions begin to falter, and eventually to disrupt.

- **Poor inter-agency and inter-departmental communication** – reading each other's files, sharing all information, establishing open lines of communication and clearly delineating tasks will avoid confusion not only for the social workers but also for the child and the family.

There were people coming in and out, telling us different things and giving us different advice – we never truly knew who was doing what and I don't think they did either. It was like the right hand not knowing what the left was doing.

(Prospective adopter at disruption meeting)

- **Not enough support for the child's foster carers to enable the child to move.**

He'd been with us for nearly two years, and on the one hand we wanted him to have his own family, but we didn't want to lose him altogether, and in the end the social workers blamed us for giving him the wrong messages.

(Foster carer at disruption meeting)

Beek *et al* (2021, pp 46–7), in their guide to the UEA (University of East Anglia) Moving to Adoption model, emphasise the importance of social workers keeping the foster carers informed about the adoption plan for the child and the timings of introductions, being available and helping the carers to understand any delays to the plan, and talking through any concerns they may have.

- **An adult agenda rather than a child-centred introduction plan.** It is surprising how often introductions are planned to fit in with pre-booked holidays, family events, annual leave, Christmas, travel convenience and financial considerations, rather than the needs and timescales of the child (Beek *et al*, 2021).
- **Not enough consideration of prospective parents' own children's needs and perspectives.** One interview with the prospective adopters' child/children is not enough. For instance, the recent Child Safeguarding Practice Review by Cumbria Safeguarding Children's Partnership on the death of Leiland-James Michael Corkill (2022) highlighted concerns that there was no work done with the birth child in the adoptive family, once the assessment had been completed.
- **Lack of clarity or agreement** about the management of introductions, the transition and the purpose of contact. Contact arrangements are sometimes decided before all the child's meaningful connections and ways to ensure continuity have been fully considered. (See Beek *et al*, 2021, for advice on contact planning.)
- **Inadequate placement support** in spite of the best laid post-placement support plans.

CASE EXAMPLE

At a disruption meeting, a potential single adopter complained that she had been unsupported. The social workers were horrified and said that they had visited more often than necessary because they knew the placement was at risk. 'That's right', said the adopter, 'but you always made me feel you were coming to put your minds at rest, not to support me.'

It may be that needs change after the child moves into the family, that provision is not as expected or even not available. Support is only as good as it feels to those on the receiving end.

- **Adopters' difficulties with sharing problems with their support network.** In one recent case, adopters could not bring themselves to mobilise help from their network, and this reluctance was a factor in the ensuing disruption. The agency concerned will now, in future, call meetings for adopters and their networks as part of preparation and assessment.
- **A lack of openness in the adoptive family.** Openness in general, rather than open adoption, is the desirable aim; Brodzinsky (2005) compares communicative openness with structural openness.

CASE EXAMPLES

Family A declared itself to be in favour of "open adoption" and to welcome direct contact with the birth family. Contact arrangements were meticulously made and adhered to. But each event was hedged in with conditions, limitations and consequently tensions. After a year, the child declined to meet their birth parents and all contact was abruptly terminated.

Family B demonstrated an openness in their lifestyle. They accepted that their adopted child had meaningful connections and were prepared to ensure continuity. Indirect letterbox contact became a valued family enterprise and eventually led to regular meetings with the birth family.

- **Not enough preparation of the child or children for the move to adoption.** Children who have settled and made progress in time-limited foster care will not automatically maintain that progress if they have to move again, and they may not be ready to extend their attachments to new carers. The UEA Moving to Adoption model notes that foster carers can be crucial to this process (Beek et al, 2021, p. 46):

This foster carer is helping a young child to trust and enjoy their place in the foster family, while at the same time introducing the idea of change, accepting that the child may not fully understand this: 'We talk a lot about

families and she loves naming people in the household, including the pets we have. She knows she is one of our family and we talk about our family being a helping family and that she will move on to her forever family soon – this is a hard concept for her to understand though. We read books and stories about different families to help this process'. In this example, availability and building trust are linked to helping the child understand family membership, a key element of the move.

Adoption and permanence may be threatening ideas for a child, denoting the final severance from their birth parents.

The final contact meeting with the birth mother was very emotional – the children clung to her and the mother was equally upset. Adeola ran after the car as her mother was being driven away. There will be letterbox contact but no face-to-face contact. The children are now ready to move on.

(Excerpt from social worker's report read out at a disruption meeting)

"Goodbye" or "Wishing you well meetings" may help the adults to "move on", but it is not possible for children to internalise a permanent separation from birth parents, even if they have come to terms with adoption. Children will need considerable support before, during and after these meetings (Beek et al, 2021, pp.66–7).

- **Not enough preparation of the prospective adopters to parent this particular child or sibling group.** No one can be a parent to any or every child between the age of three and five, or to any other category of children. Every child is a special person, and families need the opportunity to "learn the child", however long it takes, after matching, and before introductions.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, some adoption panels and practitioners have been questioning the impact of working during the pandemic on some more recent adoptions that disrupted: assessments carried out mainly virtually, with limited observations of prospective adopters in their home environment; introductions which had to be completed mainly virtually, without the usual interactions between foster carers and adopters; and limited support available to new adopters due to restrictions, e.g. family and friends support, social workers not visiting the family in person, fewer support services available in the early days of the pandemic. To date, these observations are solely anecdotal, with no research evidence as yet, but it is worth bearing these factors in mind.

The last two bullet points regarding preparation really cover all the others. Many previously undiscovered yet significant circumstances can be identified, interpreted and predicted with focused preparation:

- Has enough work been put into the period between matching and introduction to prepare **this** family for **this** child and **this** child for **this** family?

- Has a Child Appreciation Day offered a multi-faceted view of the child and the possibility to ask new questions (Sayers and Roach, 2011)?
- Have prospective adopters and social workers together identified and secured health, education and therapeutic services before placement, and is funding assured (e.g. through the Adoption Support Fund) before it is required?
- Has direct work with the child or children reached a desired goal?
- Has the new family had ample opportunity to consider how this placement will affect family dynamics, including children already in the family?
- Has a placement support package, including financial support, been agreed, and a continuity plan for the child been put in place?

It may be, of course, that during this intensive final stage the family will discover that they cannot become the right parents for this child or for this group of children. If they do, it will be less painful for all involved than a disruption later. Every stage on the way to permanence ought to offer the choice of going on or calling a halt. Supporting people to withdraw requires as much skill as enabling them to continue.

COMMON CONCERNS

There are some common concerns about family placement, which also have to be given due consideration:

- the age of the child in relation to other children in the prospective family;
- ethnic, cultural and religious matching;
- placing siblings together or apart: finding families for large sibling groups (sibling placements are further discussed in the next chapter);
- contact needs and prescriptions;
- the child's need to be the only, or by far the youngest, child in the family;
- the difficulties of placing older children, and children with disabilities (disability is further discussed in Chapter 6).

There is research evidence (Parker *et al*, 1999) to make us wary of placing children in families that already have a child of similar age, in order to safeguard children's feelings about their place in a family, and provide time for adopters to spend enough time with each child as is required for their developmental needs.

Preserving sibling relationships is an issue central to every aspect of childcare (Neil, 1999; Lord and Borthwick, 2008; Beckett, 2021). We have learned how important it is to keep children in touch with their birth families

(Brodzinsky *et al*, 1992; Ryburn, 1994; Neil *et al*, 2015). And we are anxious about establishing contact arrangements in permanent placements (Argent, 2002; Macaskill, 2002; Neil *et al*, 2015; Beek *et al*, 2021).

If a child has been seriously neglected, we tend to believe they will only thrive as an “only” child with the benefit of the new carers’ full-time and undivided attention.

If children have serious disabilities, we tend to presume they will need two parents to manage them.

All these concerns are real enough and send out warning signals, but we have to beware of making rigid assumptions and writing our guidelines in stone.

- Children have been successfully placed in families that have another child of similar age.
- Children can do well with carers of a different ethnicity, in spite of the issues inherent in transracial adoptions.

We understand the importance of integrating the significance of culture and ethnicity into our practice (Barn, 2000; Prevatt-Goldstein and Spencer, 2000; Thoburn *et al*, 2000; Beesley, 2020).

However, a generalised concern for respecting the significance of a child’s heritage in matching is insufficient. In assessing a child’s needs, social workers should be able to carefully explore and record what they know (and of course what the child knows, if he or she is able to contribute, depending on age and understanding) about his/her identity, ethnicity and culture, and be confident in distinguishing these different concepts.

(Selwyn *et al*, 2010)

- Siblings may have to be parted for a variety of reasons, but they may also be successfully placed together in amazingly large groups with one or two parents.
- Children and families can negotiate and manage a range of complex contact arrangements.
- The neediest child may do better without being the focus of attention as an only child.
- Young people up to the age of 16, with severe disabilities, have settled in new permanent families, with one or two parents.

A relatively new concern is the availability of social networking websites for children and birth families separated by adoption or other permanent placements. Adopters need to be prepared to supervise and support their children in the face of these new opportunities and risks (Fursland, 2013).

Every child is unique and every family is unique: good placements cannot be made by ticking boxes and observing rules, but we do need to keep a checklist of known risks very firmly at the back of our minds. We can try to prevent disruption, but we cannot eliminate disruption. We have to find ways to manage and move on from disruption.