

Chapter 2

The benefits and challenges of family network meetings

Before discussing the practicalities of holding a family network meeting, it is important to consider both the identified benefits and challenges of this approach.

BENEFITS OF FAMILY NETWORK MEETINGS

Feedback from social workers, applicants, adopters and members of support networks who have experience of these meetings has to date been very positive. There may be specific benefits from family network meetings depending on the stage of the process at which meetings are held, but the information provided can offer consistent messages in relation to the adoption journey that the whole network is embarking on.

Benefits for the adoptive family, their child/ren and their network

- Family network meetings can be tailored to suit the needs of individual families and can be used at various stages in the process – during assessment, during matching, and as part of the support process post-placement.
- Preparing for the meeting itself can encourage applicants/adopters to think more widely about their support network, not just in relation to immediate family members but also in relation to those who will be able to help out in an emergency. This usually means that a wider group of supports is identified and allows those people to meet and interact with each other. Virtual meetings enable family members who live at a distance or abroad to be included so everyone feels involved, helping to harness commitment and develop understanding and insight. It can also be reassuring for close relatives living at a distance to see the geographically local support network available to the adopters.
- Family network meetings offer another chance to include family/friends who may not have attended earlier pre-adoption generic network training, or family introduction to adoption sessions.

- Family network meetings help to demystify the adoption process, as attendees learn about the process of adoption and its various stages. Significant amounts of information about adoption can be shared with numerous family and friends, providing an opportunity for attendees to ask questions and so taking pressure away from the adopters to be the ones responsible for educating their network.
- Many people with limited adoption experience may understandably have an outdated understanding of adoption and what it entails today. Family network meetings provide an opportunity to talk about “modern adoption”, and for family and friends to hear and understand more in relation to the impact of trauma, regression, therapeutic parenting and the importance of a non-judgemental approach – not only toward the child but to the adopters’ parenting style. This can be the start of developing a shared culture of therapeutic parenting, an understanding of identity and life story work, and can support the network to have a balanced view of the birth family.
- When family network meetings are used as part of the adoption assessment process, anonymised profiles of children can be used to help the network think about children’s needs and to emphasise that while those in the network may have parented in a certain way, children being placed for adoption need an alternative model of parenting.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

Staff use an exercise to help the family network understand the sensory overload a child who has experienced trauma may feel. One person is reading aloud, another person is talking loudly, and a third person is jumping up and down while blowing up a balloon until it bursts. The exercise helps the network understand how children cannot be aware of what is happening for them while they are so distracted by the conflicting information in their head, and their emotional responses to this.

(Cornwall Adoption Service)

In their meetings held as part of assessment, we share the example of a four-year-old child needing to be fed with a bottle to help attendees understand regression and the alternative parenting strategies adopters may need to use.

(Adopt Thames Valley)

- When utilised in matching, agencies can use a family network meeting to provide a strengths-based approach to the child, but also to highlight areas where the child may experience some challenges, with the aim of enabling people to put themselves in the child’s shoes and to understand the grief and loss the child may be feeling. The family network can start to develop an understanding of this unique child.

- Use of meetings at the matching stage can be a helpful opportunity to talk about how the child/ren will be gradually integrated into the family, to ensure they meet network members in a way they are comfortable with, and to think about major family events and how a child may/may not benefit from involvement in these. Attendees can be encouraged to think about how and when they should be introduced to the child and to consider the impact of large family gatherings, such as social, cultural and religious celebrations, especially in the early days of placement.
- Adopters have reported to agencies that for family network members, hearing information from professionals during the matching process had a greater impact than when the adopters themselves have tried to discuss this, and the information was less likely to be dismissed or ignored by family members desperate to meet their new family member. Some networks appear to have been more respectful of boundaries having heard these messages and the rationale behind them from the agency.
- Family network meetings at the matching stage can fully explore the role of each family member/friend during the introductions and help to develop the support offer with greater clarity. The meetings can be used to agree who will do what in the way of practical support – especially during introductions, for example, pet care, child care for existing children in the family, grocery shopping, etc. Most adopters will have established some of this in advance, but feedback suggests that a request from the agency takes the pressure off them a) to ask for support; and b) to coordinate it all. Families and friends are usually very thoughtful in their offers and keen to help. However, the meeting can remind them that bombarding adopters with calls at certain stages of the process to see how they are, may not be the support they need.
- If the network compiles the support plan, they take ownership of it and are likely to commit to it. The support needs of the child, adopters and children already in the family can be considered and significant support roles identified. This may be particularly relevant for single adopters, whose support needs during introductions may require a particular individual to be more involved.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE

One agency uses a quiz to introduce some of the concepts in adoption. For example, questions such as:

- Can you list two reasons why children need adopting?
- What qualities do you think adopters need to have?
- Who should know about a child's pre-adoptive history?
- Some workers ask the network members to bring something tangible to show what support they can offer, e.g. an iron, a casserole dish, etc.

Benefits for the agency

- Family network meetings offer the agency an opportunity to introduce social workers directly to the wider family and, by putting a face to an organisation, hope to make it easier should any family/friends feel the need to contact the agency. The network has a greater understanding of the role the agency will play in the ongoing life of the adoptive family, and know who to contact should they have any concerns. Family and friends feedback has shown that they are very appreciative of this and feel valued and included in the adoption journey.
- Importantly, the understanding that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility can be developed and reinforced at a family network meeting. Meetings can highlight the ongoing role the agency will play, but can sensitively deliver the key message that if family/friends are in any way worried about the adopters or the child, they must contact the agency. This does need to be sensitively and supportively framed, but is a critical message, and feedback from adopters to date does seem to indicate that it is seen positively. Meetings can be used to promote wider trust and relationships between the adopters, the agency and their family/friends, and encourage open and honest communication.
- When used in assessment, family network meetings can inform analysis and provide more evidence for the home study. The assessing worker has an opportunity to observe family interactions, which can be particularly beneficial, allowing an opportunity to see how comfortable family members are with each other and how they communicate. Face-to-face meetings can provide very valuable opportunities to include children from the wider network, and can provide rich observation of the interactions between them and the adoptive applicants. Some agencies interview referees after the family network meeting has taken place, and have found them to be more realistic in their references.
- Observations and discussions at the family network meeting may identify areas of family stress. This can offer the assessing social worker evidence to explore the issue with the adopters in an open manner that might not have been possible without those observations.
- Family network meetings can tighten up the support plan and, in some cases, doing so might ensure an increased level of confidence in the match before the matching panel, especially if it helps to address some of the identified vulnerabilities – such as placing a sibling group.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE

A meeting was held with adopters who were considering adopting a third sibling with a very high level of need. The meeting focused on what their support needs might be and the capacity of both the adopters and the network to support the needs of the third child, whilst continuing to meet the needs of the other two children. It was noted that initially the grandparents in this case were anxious about the demands on the family of caring for a third child, but by the end of the meeting were reassured by the support plan available.

When this match was presented to the adoption panel, panel members were reassured by the family network meeting having been held, and the robust support package agreed.

Attendees of the family network meeting can be reminded about confidentiality – the agency is sharing the information rather than the adopters, and so is modelling what is appropriate to share, i.e. a focus on the child as they are not their detailed life story.

- Meetings held post-placement can address emerging vulnerabilities; we heard examples of family network meetings helping to reduce the likelihood of adoption disruption.

GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE

A family network meeting was held following a referral from a neighbour. A year post-placement, the adopters were struggling without support as they felt unable to share how challenging they were finding things. They initially required a lot of encouragement to help them understand the potential benefits of a family network meeting, and to be reassured that this was not about sharing their personal business but was to harness support and focus on the here and now – alongside verbalising their support needs and enlisting help.

CHALLENGES OF FAMILY NETWORK MEETINGS

- Introducing new ways of working can be challenging for staff, although agencies starting to use family network meetings have usually held a form of launch event to provide information about the concept, rationale and model.
- In many agencies, time pressures on social work staff have prevented the use of family network meetings becoming a mandatory part of the adoption process for all assessments and matches. Face-to-face meetings

offer more opportunities for informal interaction and discussion and are generally recommended, but do have a greater impact on time, and increase organisational cost.

- The pressure on social work staff to coordinate family network meetings and fit them in at a busy time, such as after the matching panel, is recognised. Equally, however, they can be very valuable tools that save time in other ways. For example, some assessing workers have met confidentially with referees immediately after the family network meeting and had more focused and meaningful discussions as a result of information already shared.
- The adoption agency needs to develop their approach – to develop the model of family network meetings in relation to when and how they will be used, guidance, resources and tools to assist. This takes some focused practitioner time.
- Staff concerns – some workers have reported feeling very anxious about leading these meetings, although this can diminish with opportunities to observe more experienced staff undertaking the role.
- There can be an issue of how to support and manage adopters who do not want to share their thoughts with a wider group in a family network meeting, or who feel threatened by sharing more widely – although feedback to date from adopters has been overwhelmingly positive.

CONCLUSION

In summary, there are considerable benefits both to the adoptive family and the assessing and placing agencies in undertaking family network meetings. There are also implications for staff time and the need for resources, and individual commitment to ensuring these meetings are positive experiences for all. However, on balance, the benefits appear to outweigh the challenges in the agency practice that has been seen so far in this area.