

PRACTICE NOTE 18

RECRUITING BLACK FAMILIES

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Practice Note 13, *The placement needs of black children*, many agencies have responded by asking us, 'How do we move on?'. They have heard that children from black and minority ethnic communities need families that reflect their own racial and cultural background, have debated this, and have accepted it. Queries are no longer about whether a black family is the most appropriate: they are about strategies and ideas for recruiting such families. This Practice Note addresses the question of recruitment and assessment within black and minority ethnic communities. It draws on experiences of agencies that have had some success in recruiting from these communities.

Before proceeding any further, it is important to emphasise that the major factor crucial to any successful campaign is the belief of staff within the recruiting agency: (a) that the families do exist, and (b) that they have something to offer. It must also be acknowledged that previous lack of success in recruiting black families may have been due to agency practices as well as to approaches or methods adopted by staff.

EXAMINING PRECONCEIVED IDEAS

It is important to be aware of our own assumptions before starting any recruitment campaign, but is particularly crucial when recruiting from minority ethnic communities. For example, we should ask ourselves, 'What is a family?' Traditionally the 'family' has been seen as consisting of a man and a woman plus child or children and social work to some extent still accepts this stereotype of the 'ideal family', which is of course far from the norm. The reality is that families come in many variations: single women with children; single women living alone; single men; couples with a child or children or childless, etc. The 'normal' two-parent family where the husband works and the wife stays at home is now in fact a minority. It is crucial to recognise this before embarking on a recruitment drive.

In asking ourselves 'What will best meet the needs of this child/these children?' we need to remind ourselves that the traditional nuclear family is not the only possible form of family system appropriate for children – and that in fact their needs may be better met in a 'non-traditional' family.

PUBLICITY STRATEGIES

1. *Aim directly at your target group*

A major message from the 'soul kids' campaign in the 1970s, which has been reinforced in subsequent campaigns, is that black families do respond to publicity which is specifically aimed at them. It is not enough merely to show a picture of a black child and state that this child needs a family: the text should spell out quite categorically that family from the child's *own racial and cultural background* is needed.

Information about these children should be fed repeatedly into minority ethnic communities. This process has two effects: a) it increases knowledge within the communities about black children in the care system, and b) it reinforces the message that members of black and minority ethnic communities are needed and that their value is now recognised by social services/social work departments. This latter point is important because historically the message to black and minority ethnic communities, through transracial adoption and fostering policies, has been that they have nothing to offer their own children. This means that extra effort now needs to be made to convince members of these communities that their help is both needed and valued.

An additional point about winning over your target group concerns allowances. There is overwhelming evidence of the economic and material disadvantages experienced by black families in the UK today. It is therefore necessary for recruiting agencies to take positive action in providing some financial assistance to potential adoptive or foster families. Some agencies have developed plans within their adoption allowance scheme to allow for this. Having developed such a scheme, it is of course important to make sure it is known about.

2. *Know your target area*

Where publicity material is sited is crucial to its effectiveness. This means that agencies must know, or must find out about, their communities. Where are popular shopping areas, bookshops, clubs, religious meeting places, hairdressers, markets, etc., frequented by members of the community you are hoping to attract? It is important that these areas are identified so that information can be fed into the community most effectively.

What about newspapers and magazines? Find out whether there are community papers, and use newspapers other than the white 'popular press': *Caribbean Times*, *Asian Times*, and *The Voice* are but a few. You can place (a) a general advertisement for black families, or (b) ask for families to come forward for a particular age range or for sibling groups, etc., or (c) advertise for a family for an individual child. Examples of (a) and (b) are shown overleaf.

It is also useful to write articles giving information about children in care. Why/how do children come into care? What is adoption? What is fostering? Remember that although the concept of caring for other people's children is not alien to families from most minority communities, the concept of fostering and adoption, in its legal sense, may well be.

- (a) Example of a general advertisement for black families, courtesy of the Family Finding Unit, Greenwich Social Services Department
- (b) Example of an advertisement for black families for babies and young children, courtesy of Fosterfacts.

3. *Use the media*

Written information should be just a part of any publicity strategy. The use of television and radio has also proved to be an effective tool – local radio in particular is often able to offer air time.

One example of a very successful TV recruitment campaign was organised by the Independent Adoption service in 1984. Having developed contact with Community Information Service, IAS was given a 30-second slot which was televised six times on a Friday evening between 5.45 and 8.30pm. IAS staff provided a family and an outline script for the video which was featured. Community Information Service organised the making of the video, the phone-in and the mailing, while the phones were answered by Independent Adoption Service staff. The phones were staffed over a four-hour period during which 382 people phoned in and 63 more left messages on an answer-phone over the weekend. Each caller was immediately sent a letter explaining that a member of staff would contact them within two weeks and enclosing two leaflets, one aimed specifically at black families. The impact of such positive efforts was that:

- in 1983/84 IAS approved six black families
- in 1984/85 IAS approved 23 black families
- in 1985/86 IAS approved 27 black families

Over subsequent years IAS has had a steady stream of black families applying to adopt. There is no doubt that the tremendous amount of work they did and continue to do, in getting information out to communities both about the children in care and about themselves as an agency, has paid dividends.

4. *Overcome the language barrier*

When designing leaflets, posters, articles, etc., remember that for some communities English is not the first language, and it is therefore important to have material produced in different languages. Or you could draw on resources already available: for example, Fosterfacts (34 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HW) produce bright recruitment leaflets in different languages which can be used anywhere with the addition of a local address. We at BAAF have produced our leaflet *Foster care – some questions answered* in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi (other languages to follow). Wolverhampton and Coventry are among local authorities who have also produced publicity materials in various languages. Obviously, if you do adopt this strategy it is crucial that there are staff available who speak the appropriate languages and can respond to families who come forward.

5. *Make direct connections*

When exploring means of attracting families from black and minority communities, it is tempting to focus on areas of publicity, develop materials, site them, and then sit back and wait for the response. However, it has been shown through campaigns here (New Black Families, 1980/83) and in America, that one of the most effective means of recruiting within minority ethnic communities is through 'constructive gossip', or word of mouth. Agency staff need to get out there and speak directly to community groups, religious groups, people active in the community, etc. Be imaginative, work alongside community workers to set up open meetings out there, not in your office. Ask religious leaders – Imams, priests, reverends – to focus one of their services on children in care: a staff member could be present to give basic information. New Black Families used this method very effectively.

When direct contacts are being made with communities, black and minority ethnic workers are indeed a bonus and are able to get this stage off the ground and moving at a much quicker pace than white colleagues. However, the fact that at present many agencies have no black workers should not be a reason for not proceeding. Agencies such as Sheffield have not stood still despite having no black workers: instead they have drawn on ideas from areas that do and have used written information as well as their own personal skills to achieve the same goals, albeit at a slower pace.

Again, remember the importance of using clear language whether in written or spoken information. Keep it simple, avoid the use of social worker jargon and create an atmosphere in which people feel able to ask for more information or for clarity of information. If English is not the family's first language, involve speakers of that language in making your connections.

6. *Ensure that initial contacts are positive*

The initial contact between an interested family and a recruiting agency is crucial in that it influences the family's decision as to whether it will proceed any further with its enquiry. It is important that workers understand the 'ripple' effect of negative and positive contact first experienced by individuals. Experiences are quickly shared within communities and decisions are made based on this information as to whether particular agencies are worth approaching or not. Hence the backlog of families awaiting assessment in some agencies, whereas others have had very few enquiries from black families. Make sure that whoever answers the phone or meets personal callers is fully briefed and ready to be helpful and welcoming.

ASSESSMENT

The thought of being 'assessed' is frightening for anyone on the receiving end. However for black families there is the added dimension of cultural/institutional racism. Too often practitioners approached by families from minority ethnic communities seem to have decided prior to meeting the families that there would be difficulties due to cultural 'norms'. How often have you or a colleague made statements such as, 'Culturally it would not be acceptable for this family to adopt', or 'Within this community an adopted child would be stigmatised'? If you hear such statements or find yourself making them, stop and ask, on what evidence is this statement based? Too often myths, through going unchallenged, become 'facts' and as a result your agency may shut out whole communities, sections of which could be a very valuable resource.

It therefore follows that when workers are assessing cross-culturally, issues should be clarified with the family in question and assumptions not made. Remember also, that while on the face of it the language being used may be the same, words can still have very different meanings for different groups of people.

Be honest with families. Families from black and minority ethnic communities are fully aware that they have not been seen as a valued resource in the past. If challenged, do not be defensive but acknowledge past mistakes on the part of agencies and share steps taken to move forward.

Families from different communities operate differently. This does not mean that they should be seen as deviant or dysfunctional because they do not meet euro-centric expectations of what is viewed as 'right' or 'acceptable'. For example, if on a visit to an Asian family you find not only husband and wife present but also grandparents and cousins, do not immediately decide that this is a 'chaotic, overcrowded household' or that the grandparents are interfering. Remember that in many communities the involvement and support of the extended family is seen as a very real strength. Of course there may have been things you had hoped to discuss with the individual or couple privately but on this occasion use the time to explore with members of the family their feelings and understandings about

adoption, their fears and hopes, etc. Then arrange another mutually convenient time when you can meet the prospective adopters alone.

Being culturally aware and sensitive does not mean a lowering of standards: with all families the aim is to arrive at a conclusion with the family as to whether they have anything to offer a child in care. Should you feel they do have something to offer, but are not appropriate for any children in the care of your authority, redirect them to an agency who could use them, rather than leaving them in limbo.

Ensure that families are aware of the processes involved in being assessed and why these procedures are necessary. Explain that references will be taken up, police checks etc. made, and that a report will be written. It is good practice to show families the report before going to the adoption panel so that anything they may wish to question or clarify can be shared with the panel. Of course the role of the panel should also be explained. Stress that information is treated confidentially.

PREPARATION GROUPS

Many agencies have developed preparation groups for prospective substitute families. Agencies such as the Independent Adoption Service and Nottingham Black Fostering and Adoption Team have well-developed programmes which have proved very successful. It should therefore be possible for agencies developing their own programmes for preparation groups to draw on the skills and experiences of agencies such as these.

POST-PLACEMENT SUPPORT

Once a family has been approved and the child subsequently placed, we all tend to sigh with relief and satisfaction, understandably. However, experience has shown that the success of any placement is largely dependent on post-placement support – and families need to feel comfortable about asking for advice and support regardless of the status of the placement.

When offering post-placement support it is imperative to understand that, for many of these families, being faced with a black child who does not see themselves as black and who has an overtly negative attitude towards their race and culture will be a new and daunting experience. This is not to say that the families will be unable to cope, but it is important that professionals recognise that this is unlikely to be an experience many families would have faced before, so back-up and support will be necessary. In these instances families may need time and space to discuss how the child's negative attitude affects them as a family as well as strategies for helping such a child.

In developing our own thinking and exploring new methods of recruitment and assessment, let us not lose sight of good practice. Yes, the needs of children are best met by families from their own racial and cultural background but once we recruit these families, we must give them adequate and appropriate support.

CHECKLIST

It would be helpful for recruiting agencies to address the following questions before embarking on a recruiting campaign for black families. (There are of course many other questions that could be added to this list.)

1. What do we mean by the term 'family'?
2. Why do we need black families?
3. Who are the children we are attempting to recruit families for?
4. What are the needs of these children?
5. What resources do we have available to mount this campaign?
6. What strategies are most likely to reach people in our local area?
7. How will we give families the necessary information – e.g. Standard letters, information meetings, etc.?
8. Who will take responsibility for particular tasks – e.g. staffing the phone, running groups, undertaking assessments, etc.?

9. Are there neighbouring boroughs/agencies that will undertake some assessments should we be unable to follow up all our enquirers?
10. How will we review the outcome of our campaign?

Further reading

ABSWAP (Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professions) 'Black Children in Care' Evidence to the House of Commons Social Services Committee, 1983.

Ahmed A *Practice with care* Race Equality Unit/National Institute for Social Work, 1990.

Ahmed B *Black perspectives in social work* Venture Press/Race Equality Unit/National Institute for Social Work, 1990.

Ahmed S, Cheetham J and Small J *Social work with black children and their families* Batsford/BAAF, 1986.

Children's Legal Centre 'Black and In Care conference report' Black and In Care steering group, 1985.

Comer J P and Poussaint A F *Black child care* Pocket Books, 1976.

Devore W and Schlesinger E *Ethnic sensitive social work practices* Merrill Publishing Company, 1987.

Hayes M M 'Telling a child they are black' *Social Work Today* 19 January, 1989.

Londer J *Mixed families* Anchor, 1978.

Wilson A *The developmental psychology of a black child* African Resource Publications, 1980.

Wilson A *Mixed race children: a study of identity* Allen and Unwin, 1987.

Adoption and fostering, BAAF's quarterly journal, regularly features articles on social work practice with black families. The current issue, back copies and an index are available direct from BAAF.

BAAF's Black Issues Project has built up a resource file of further reading and information in this area, which is sited in BAAF's head office. Contact the Project for arranging a visit.

BAAF PRACTICE NOTES

- 1 Private placements (out of print)
- 2 Adoption and fostering panels (out of print)
- 3 Consent to medical treatment for children in care or placed for adoption
 - 4 Adoption panels in England and Wales
- 5 Medical aspects of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 (England and Wales)
 - 6 A-Z of changes in the law (England and Wales)
 - 7 Using the media
 - 8 A-Z of changes in the law (Scotland)
- 9 Medical aspects of the Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations (out of print)
 - 10 Using the BAAF medical forms
 - 11 Custodianship
- 12 Information for adoptive parents about their child's background
 - 13 Placement needs of black children
 - 14 Post-traumatic stress disorder in children
- 15 Schedule 2 reports under the Adoption Rules 1984
- 16 Accommodating children (England and Wales)
 - 17 Access to Medical Reports Act 1988
 - 18 Recruiting black families