

Adoption and Permanency planning and support services: practice into implementation

Key Messages

Support services: should start as early as possible into a placement, by experienced and knowledgeable staff and be available for as long as possible;

Partners and family: multi-agency partners need to be on board to support adopted children, eg, health, education, the courts and a broad range of professionals; guardians should be engaged early on in discussions to avoid misunderstandings;

Recruitment and training: proactive recruitment of prospective concurrent carers from diverse black and minority ethnic communities is needed as well as high quality staff who can work well with professionals from other agencies/services;

Contact: the number of contacts with each carer needs to be organised and regulated; the distance between foster placement and contact venue should be no greater than 20 miles

strategic issues: permanence planning is not suitable for all children; partnership working, the ability to collaborate and create and sustain commitment across a system underpinned by the senior management team, are needed for whole systems change.

1. Introduction

C4EO works with local areas and services (across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors) to gather examples of excellent local practice which have led to significantly improved outcomes for children, young people and their families. Examples are assessed by a panel of sector experts who consider them against robust criteria, including the ability for other local areas to implement and use this 'best' practice. C4EO has three levels of validation:

Fully validated where there is *good* evidence of the impact on outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Promising where there is *some* evidence of impact on outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Emerging practice These examples include the re-design or transformation of services but are usually too early in their development to demonstrate improved outcomes.

The examples in this paper are drawn from our bank of Fully Validated and illustrate how local authorities and other providers are reducing the number of children in care, improving the processes and support services that lead to adoption and other permanency options. A full list of the practice we have on this theme, at all 3 levels of validation are set out in the [annex](#).

This guide moves from a description of practice to implementation of the practice; from talk to action.

2. Local Practice Examples

Fostering Attachments: improving placement stability in Windsor & Maidenhead

Aim: To delivering parenting programmes to foster and adoptive parents focusing on the importance of attachment; to increase the skills and confidence of parents; to increase the children's understanding of their behavioural and emotional needs, to increase the child's security and sense of belonging.

Service/Activities: Activity focuses around a fostering attachment course provided by qualified therapists from the Tier Two CAMHS team. Three 6 week modules are delivered over 9 months through PowerPoint presentations, small and large discussion groups, role plays, videos and home reflections.

Evidence of Improved Outcomes: (Based on a cohort of 5 adoptive parents and 1 foster carer). Parents' stress levels were measured pre- and post- intervention through the Parental Stress Index (PSI) and through semi-structured interview; the stresses associated with this scale are: an impaired sense of parenting competence, stresses associated with "other life" roles, conflict with child's birth parents, lack of social support and depression. Post-intervention, total stress scores decreased across all the domains and the scores were no longer clinically significant. **No** placement broke down.

Costs: the 3 module course costs £325.56 per family. If a placement breaks down, the child is likely to have to go to an independent foster placement costing £36,400-£46,800 per year or a residential placement costing £208,000-£260,000 per year.

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=393>

The Adoption Service in Swindon

Aim: To develop an effective approach to recruiting, training and supporting potential adoptive parents, with a high success rate of placing children with adoptive parents within the local authority.

Service/Activities: Adoption services are provided through the Family Placement Team. Duties include: the recruitment, assessment, training and support of prospective new adopters, post-approval training and support of adopters searching for the right child and awaiting placements; 'Home-finding' and matching children identified in need of adoption, provision of prescribed adoption support services to adoptive families including financial support, support groups, therapeutic services for adopted children, support services for nurturing adoptive relationships, general counselling and advice.

The service prides itself on recruiting its own adopters. The ethos of the adoption service is to give support to adopters throughout the young person's childhood and beyond where necessary. The service never closes a case, and gives adopters easy access back to the Service for advice, guidance and support. Adopters are provided with post approval training and support, and can access extensive further training once the children have been adopted. The service aims to ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop successful lifelong relationships. The work is supported by strong, tested and regularly reviewed policies and procedures.

Evidence of Improved Outcomes: there has only been one disruption (breakdown) in the past 3 years (2009 to date); in this case, the adopters were approved by a different local

authority; for every child placed, 2 adoptive families are recruited. 42 adoptive families recruited in three years, most proceeded to adoption but 4 did not.

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=388>

Coram's Concurrent Planning Services

Aim/idea: Coram's concurrent planning is an approach to permanence planning in fostering and adoption, focused on very vulnerable children aged 0-24 months. It places babies who are the subject of care proceedings with carers who are dually approved as foster carers and adopters.

Service/Activities: Recruitment of concurrent planning carers emphasises the child centred focus of the programme; carers undertake specific preparation for fostering via concurrent planning in addition to preparation for adoption which includes learning about the fostering task, working in partnership with the local authority, managing contact and working with the child's parents; carers are particularly supported to develop a relationship with the child's birth mother (or relative); social work support to all parties is essential throughout the process, given how emotionally stressful it is for the mother (or relative) and also the carers.

Improved outcomes: Over the life of the project, 57 children have been fostered in concurrent planning foster placements, of whom three returned to the care of a family member, and 54 have been adopted. Two are in the process of court proceedings. A study of this work is just starting.

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/adoptionfostering/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=427>

Family Futures multi-disciplinary neuro-sequential approach to working with traumatised children, London

Aim: to develop a model of practice based on theory and clinical research that addresses the needs of older children, placed for adoption, with attachment difficulties and their families.

Service/Activities: Establishing a referral system - adoptive parents and their children are able to access an evidence-based multi-disciplinary service via a free consultation as a point of first contact; providing a multi-disciplinary assessment of needs; providing a therapy package with built-in ongoing collaborative evaluation from children, parents, allied professionals and the Family Futures team.

Improved outcomes: The statistical evidence gathered to date indicates that 95% of the families in the treatment programme remain together (representing a 5% breakdown rate), and show significant improvement. National research statistics show that, for older, placed children, the breakdown rate of placements can be between 25 and 30% depending on the age of the child at placement (the average age of children coming to Family Futures is eight).

Costs: There are no fixed fees for the programme; each one is bespoke; the assessment for an individual child is £3,000 plus VAT; treatment programmes can range from £10,000 to £60,000 over a two- to three-year period.

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/adoptionfostering/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=386>

Early Permanency planning, South Tyneside

Aim: To implement 'Concurrent planning' in which, if children are not rehabilitated to their birth family, they are adopted by their foster carers. In the concurrent planning model, foster carers are proactive in trying to support the birth family to rehabilitate their child and it is only when this does not work that they step in to offer the child a permanent home through becoming adoptive parents.

Service/Activities: The concept of this form of concurrent planning was introduced to prospective adopters in information and preparation sessions. At the same time discussions took place with the local courts and the regional CAFCASS office in order to inform them of this change of practice, to outline what they were hoping to achieve and to give reassurances that such plans were in keeping with adoption legislation. A permanence policy was developed which underpins all of the work in the area of permanency and within it, there is emphasis on concurrent planning being used if it is at all possible.

Improved outcomes: from 2004 until present (March 2012), 12 children have been the subjects of such a concurrent plan. On average, as a small local authority, 26 children are adopted each year; this in turn represents approximately 12% of the Looked After population.

costs: no additional cost incurred; there have been savings as children spend less time with foster carers.

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/adoptionfostering/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=363>

SafeBase Parenting Programme, After Adoption UK

Aim: to increase availability and longevity of adoptive placements by educating and empowering parents to make a positive and sustained change to their family relationships.

Practice/Activities: SafeBase is a four-day parenting programme which is delivered to between 4-10 families at a time and involves an initial Family Observation which acts as a learning platform from which parents can put the exercises and information they gain on the programme into perspective. The programme covers 4 areas: Structure: setting limits and providing an appropriately ordered environment;

Engagement: engaging the child in interaction while being responsive to the child's state and reactions;

Nurture: meeting the child's needs for attention, soothing and care;

Challenge: supporting and encouraging the child's efforts to achieve a developmentally appropriate level.

Improved Outcomes: The programme has benefited the lives of 384 children, with 247 families attending the course since 2005. The disruption rate (breakdown) for families who have attended the programme is 2.5%; 31.7% of families were referred 'at a stage of crisis' and 30.9% were already having previous CAMHS involvement.

Costs: The programme costs £1,995 (£2,195 in London) for one family to attend. The saving stands at approximately £30,000 - £50,000 for every year that the child is in care, plus the incalculable costs of a disrupted adoption.

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/adoptionfostering/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=398>

Team Parenting - Parenting programme for foster carers, Foster Care Associates (Core Assets Group)

Team Parenting™ is a systemic, resilience and strengths based therapeutic approach centering on the needs of the child/young person in placement by considering the whole placement context as a dynamic process of family/ professional interactions and relationships

Practice/activities: Team Parenting™ is about bringing together those professionals involved in the child/young person's life in order to provide cohesive full picture of the child and as a result maintain stability and encourage well-being: supervising Social worker, LA social worker, team parent meetings, schools support workers, therapeutic support (therapy groups, joint child/carer therapy), team parenting training programme.

Improved outcomes: placement stability has increased in the areas using TP; For example, as of March 31st 2008 83.33% of children (under 16) placed with FCA Thames Valley for more than two and a half years have been in their current placement for more than two years, and this figure increased to 91.3% as of 31st March 2011.

3. Implementing practice in your locality

Key implementation issues:

Support to prospective adopters and foster carers:

- support programmes must take place early in the placement, as the sooner the team, carer, young person and other professionals can begin to work on strategies to help the more successful the outcomes are likely to be;
- Providing adoptive parents with access to support *for the life* of the adoption
- high level of support needed by experienced and knowledgeable staff who know how to effectively target interventions for adopters
- Post placement support should be provided in the form of an integrated multi-disciplinary service specialising in children who are in substitute family care.
- The therapeutic group approach provides an environment where parents and carers can be supported through a change process that improves placement stability. The group must be run by therapeutic staff for no more than ten parents or carers because of the element of personal exploration of one's own attachment and parenting style.
- helpful support techniques: observation of family dynamics and feedback to family with discussion; clearly structured training programmes for prospective adopters and adoptive parents; follow up parent support groups; online forum for ongoing support and advice; handbook/written materials for each family.

Partners and Family

-it is vital to get partners on board for the support of adopted children, including health, education, the courts and a broad range of professionals

-a genuinely parent-and-child friendly approach where both are seen as co-collaborators; listen to what the children themselves have to say

-get children's guardians on board when planning and have 'early day' discussions rather than risk problems or misunderstandings occurring once the child is in placement.

Recruitment and Training

-ensure proactive recruitment of prospective concurrent carers from diverse black and minority ethnic communities

- Training staff for concurrent planning placements is crucial for all involved in the child's plan so that the position and role of the foster carers/adopters is fully understood

-The quality of the staff is crucial; practitioners across the board who can truly work in a multidisciplinary way are required.

- Opportunities to reflect needs to become the rationale for all working practices, allowing time specifically devoted to case discussion not just as individuals but in teams. This promotes not only safeguarding but training for newer members of the team and prevents hierarchy of professions.

-In concurrent planning placements, adopters need to be clear that for a number of months they will be fostering the child and therefore not technically eligible for adoption leave.

- personal resilience and tenacity and an ability to learn continuously

Costs

-adequate financial support during the fostering phase is needed to enable lone parents and those on low incomes to undertake a concurrent planning for permanency role

- concurrent planning incurs no additional cost, as the children would have had to have been in mainstream foster care with all of its associated costs

Contact

-settling in time – ideally, the courts should allow a settling in period of 7 to 14 days with the foster carers, before contact begins

-short travel time – the distance between foster placement and contact venue should be no greater than 20 miles

- regularity of contact with carers – ideally not more than three times per week

-active supervisor role – the contact supervisor coaches and models good parenting for the birth parent during contact

Strategic issues

-permanence planning is only suitable or feasible in a small number of cases – not the right route for every child being adopted

- It is crucial to place children for adoption at as young an age as possible as this greatly improves the chances of a successful placement and provides the opportunity for children to form strong healthy attachments and reach their developmental milestones at the appropriate stages of their lives.

-Partnership working, the ability to collaborate and create and sustain commitment across a system, are important skills

-demonstrating a belief in team and people

-commitment of all members of the senior management team. The number of coordinated strategies require whole system change, from robust management of admissions to care, increased expectations of in-house services and targeted commissioning practices, to a change in culture and practice. The interdependent nature of the implementation required sign-up from all stakeholders

Annex

Using the family group conference as a mechanism to enable the family to respond to safeguarding concerns about their children, North Somerset

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=174>

Youth Inspection of the Leaving Care Team, North Cheam, Sutton

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=377>

Children in Care Councils, Staffordshire

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=180>

Multi-dimensional Foster Care, Kent

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=291>

South East Wales Improvement Collaboration – commissioning LAC placements

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=374>

Reduction of the numbers of Looked After Children (LAC) in residential care, London Borough of Enfield

<http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/vlpdetails.aspx?lpeid=381>