

An exploration and development of matching practices: Danielle Turney and Julie Selwyn in collaboration with CoramBAAF (2013-2015)

Summary

This work, funded by the Department for Education, was part of a much larger project undertaken by BAAF. The project was designed to: a) identify good practice; b) test innovative methods of matching such as Adoption Activity days and DVD profiling of adopters and c) produce materials that would guide practitioners in making difficult decisions. During the project, a DVD and good practice guides have been produced, and two rounds of reflective learning sets have taken place to explore practitioners' experiences of matching in adoption. To find out more about adoption activity days go to <http://www.baaf.org.uk/ourwork/activitydays>

The Hadley Centre's contribution to the project was to evaluate the research evidence to inform the good practice guides and consider practitioners' views on matching. Danielle Turney facilitated some of the learning sets, which took place in different settings across the country. This summary focuses on the learning sets.

Reflective learning sets – the rationale

The learning sets were established to address a gap in knowledge, as there is currently little research evidence about how adoption linking and matching processes 'work'. Such knowledge as is available comes mainly from situations that have gone wrong, rather than those where things have gone well. So the objective in the learning sets was to enable small groups of social work professionals to meet for an agreed number of sessions to discuss and share their experiences of the matching process in adoption, with a view to building a better understanding of matching practice.

Six groups met in different parts of the country in 2014 and 7 groups met in 2015. Each group consisted of approx. 8 social work practitioners or managers with close involvement in permanence work and matching. The groups met for six sessions and all the sessions were supported by experienced facilitators. The groups considered the practice knowledge that social workers currently drew upon to make a match between a child and an adoptive family. They also provided a reflective space for the participants to think and share ideas about matching, and consider the evidence base for decision-making.

Findings - Learning from practitioners' experience

Over the course of the learning sets, participants discussed a wide range of issues in relation to linking and matching processes and practices. The learning sets also provided an opportunity to gather their views on a range of specific questions, including:

- What factors do practitioners think are most important, when considering linking and matching?

- What factors in their experience contribute to a 'successful' match?
- What are the most common difficulties or challenges encountered in the process(es) of linking and matching?

Participants also highlighted issues related to the complexity of work with the different individuals and groups involved in the process of matching, including the child/ren, prospective adopters, foster carers, birth families, and other professionals.

Factors identified by practitioners that contributed to a 'successful' match included:

- Realistic expectations and ability to accept the child for who she/he is
- Empathy, positivity, warmth
- Connection between the child and prospective family – 'chemistry'
- Good working relationships and support (from foster carers, SWs etc)
- Honesty – addressing & managing concerns, anxieties
- Preparation

Common difficulties and challenges encountered in linking and matching included:

- Poor communication
- Procedural difficulties
- Inadequate or poor information
- Inter-agency or inter-professional difficulties
- Timing (delay/drift or rushed process) and impact on preparation
- Managing complex emotions
- Negotiating role of professional in adopter-led process

More generally, participants' reflections on their experiences of linking and matching focused on three key themes:

- Managing process
- Managing relationships and
- Managing one's own internal world / feelings

Some of the issues raised within each of these themes are presented below.

Managing process

A range of practice and organisational issues were identified, within this broad theme, including:

- Importance of good knowledge of prospective adopters /child(ren)
- Keeping information up to date and sharing it effectively and in a timely manner
- Time scales
- Preparation and forward planning
- Working with the current asymmetry between number of adopters and number of available children

- Anticipating and planning for support needs
- Differences in procedure and practice within and between organisations
- New practice initiatives
- Responding to external 'drivers' for change
- Benefits and challenges of joint working
- Resource constraints

Managing relationships

Practitioners commented on the centrality of relationships, drawing out the complexities of engaging with different participants in the adoption process. Issues they highlighted included:

- Building and sustaining relationships on what was perceived as a (shared) learning journey
- No perfect match
- Working with complex emotions, including feelings of grief and loss, of those involved in the transition to adoption
- Planning ahead for, and acknowledging the potential impact of, contact

Managing one's own internal world

Awareness of the emotional content of the work encouraged reflection within the learnings sets on the ways in which participants made sense of and managed their own feelings. Issues identified included:

- Sense of responsibility
 - Need for awareness of impact of own values, attitudes, biases
 - Managing uncertainty – one's own and others'
 - Balancing risks and opportunities
 - Awareness of the impact of previous failed matches or disruptions
 - The importance of good supervision
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