CRCF RESEARCH REPORT

University of East Anglia

PRE-ADOPTION ORDER DISRUPTIONS IN ENGLAND: LEARNING FROM DISRUPTION REPORTS

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Pre-Adoption Order Disruptions in England: Learning from disruption reports 2017 - 2024

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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

In England, there are around 3000 children adopted annually (DfE, 2024). Between 2018 and 2024, 2.5% of the placements broke down before the Adoption Order was applied for, meaning the children were not legally adopted and were returned to the care system (data from personal communication with Coram-i). This is referred to as a pre-Order disruption or disruption. The rate of disruptions, while not high, represents 479 placements - at least 479 children were affected, an experience that has consequences for children who are already likely to have experienced significant adversity (Thoburn, 2023; Neil et al, 2020). The placement disruption also has significant emotional consequences for the adopters (Lyttle et al, 2024).

Statistics are routinely collected on the children who experience disruption e.g. age, ethnicity, siblings etc. Research into breakdowns and disruptions have identified characteristics related to the child, the adopters, professionals and wider systemic issues. However, there is a gap in understanding the interplay of these variables (Palacios et al, 2019). Drawing on learning undertaken by Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) following a disruption, this research addresses the gap, providing an in-depth examination of the processes involved in disruption.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

This research was commissioned by Adoption England to extend our limited knowledge of pre-Order disruptions with the aim to inform future practices. The following questions guided the research:

- How and why did pre-Order disruptions happen?

- What factors connected to adopter preparation and assessment, family finding, matching, transitions from foster care and post placement support are implicated in pre-Order disruptions?

- What learning is available from disruption meetings for practice?

- What good practices prevent disruptions?

METHODS

There were three phases to the research. Phase 1 involved a thematic analysis of Disruption Overview reports which are produced following a disruption meeting. These provide analysis of what happened and aim to identify the learning. We received 77 reports for 184 children from RAAs across England.

Phase 2 involved discussion of two vignettes in three focus groups for professionals: children's social workers (n=10), foster carer social workers (n=7) and adoption specialists (n=11). The vignettes reflected the findings from the analysis of the reports in Phase 1 and therefore were given to the participants prior to the session to allow time for preparation. The participants were asked to explore and reflect upon what practice might help when issues emerge.

The final phase involved two online workshops, one with professionals involved in adoption work (n=23) and the other with adoptive parents (n=8) whose children were adopted during the same time span of the reports in Phase 1. The participants in both workshops received a presentation about the findings and then took part in a facilitated discussion to identify and review recommendations for practice.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings highlight the complexity of the transition and early placement period of the adoption process. It involves the careful balancing of a myriad of relationships in which communication issues can arise between the different actors involved. The research found four themes that were indicative of how the placements disrupted:

Not Said were incidents in which there were concerns or vulnerabilities that the adopter or foster carer felt unable to share openly with social workers, either because they did not know how to share or actively chose not to share the information. There were two subthemes; first, honesty about feelings reflected the emergence of concerns about the adoption as it progressed, whether it was the adopter or foster carer, that held these concerns. The barriers to sharing concerns related to being fearful of the adoption journey coming to a stop; people expressed not wanting to 'rock the boat' and adopters were conscious this was their 'last chance' to become a parent. There were also gaps in having a safe person and/or a safe space in which to raise fears and worries because of limited or no access to a social worker and with the move to online/hybrid meetings. If someone did feel able to voice their concern, there were examples of insufficient responses as social workers tended to move quickly to reassurance as opposed to allowing an exploration of current feelings in a supportive and curious way.

feelings in a supportive and curious way. The second subtheme refers to examples of active concealment in which people chose to hide information from the agency (and sometimes their own partner). Although this was not a significant factor either within the reports or in the disruption itself, examples included hiding gambling debts, past and current substance misuse, and problems within the couple relationship. These tended to come to light only when other issues emerged such as problems within introductions, the concealed information magnified the challenges being experienced.

KEY FINDINGS CONTINUED

Not known encompasses the information that was either unforeseen or unavailable prior to the placement of the child.   There were two subthemes identified, the first being a more familiar finding in the wider literature that relates to the understanding of the child and their needs. The lack of information on a child arose from outdated assessments, assessments lacking rigor or being too shallow, changes in social workers meaning knowledge being lost over time, and lack of knowledge/experience of adoption work within children's social work. There was a lack of curiosity shown of the child's current experiences and behaviours particularly where they had spent a long time in foster care. There was a striking absence of the child's voice throughout the reports exacerbated by examples of minimal or no preparation for the child in understanding their past or their future. On occasions where there was evidence of preparation work, this was often rushed and lacked opportunities for the child to process or voice their understanding. There was no evidence that the omission of information was purposeful however the partial understanding of the child and their current needs meant that when the child was placed in the adopters' home, the adopters were having to manage a situation for which they were not adequately prepared for.

Even when the adopters did feel prepared, the second subtheme adopter reaction to placement highlights that on some occasions adopters had an unforeseen or unexpected reaction to the child coming to live with them. The reactions observed had either not been a concern previously or had thought to have been addressed prior to placement and were not primarily linked to the specific demands of parenting the adopted child.

Instead the reports highlight factors that impacted the ability to effectively parent any child including unexpected deterioration in adopter mental health and unpredictable outside events e.g. job loss, illness in support network, and the child becoming ill very soon after placement.

Not heard identifies instances where information was available, but the significance of that information did not fully register or was not fully understood. This can be understood in terms of practitioners and adopters. Given the emotional investment and commitment of all involved, there was a sense of professional optimism influencing the analysis of information. For example, there were examples of confirmation bias when professionals placed too much emphasis on adopters' previous experience with children and failed to explore adequately enough what this experience meant in terms of the relentless demands of parenting and/or parenting a traumatised child. The interpretation of previous experience extended to overly hopeful analysis of previous vulnerabilities for the adopters and how they managed their stress and difficult feelings. The overly hopeful approach to the adoption was also apparent when matching considerations changed and the adopters extended their criteria with little or no exploration for the reasoning or the capacity to meet the changed criteria.

The adopter expectations of how they would manage children did not always align with the reality of parenting the adopted children. A contentious area highlighted in the reports was where adopters felt that they had not been fully prepared for the needs of the child before placement, either because key information was missing or that they had not fully understood what they were being prepared for.

KEY FINDINGS CONTINUED

The contention from agencies was that they had told and prepared the adopters for all that was known about the child. Indeed, in contrast to previous research, the reports do highlight the wealth of information and support given to adopters. We observed a disconnect in communication that may have arisen due to the way information is shared e.g. assuming everyone has the same understanding of the language used.

This also manifested in what adopters then experienced when the child was living with them; where professionals may have seen the child reacting in predictable ways to the move, the adopters could become overwhelmed and shocked at the behaviours. There was also a disconnect between the support adopters were given versus what support they felt was needed. The reports evidence a complex picture of adopters feeling they were not being heard or understood by professionals whilst professionals feeling they were doing the best they could to help.

Not challenged highlights where there were identifiable problems but they were not addressed at the time. Underlying the lack of challenge were communication issues for example when there were was a breakdown in the relationship between foster carer and adopters. Problems included foster carers being reluctant to hand over the child, failing to give key details about routines and being upset when they considered the adopters not being as excited as they wanted them to be about the child.

Conversely the reports highlight circumstances in which the adopters did not listen to the advice and support being given from professionals or were dismissive of the foster carers. It is apparent from the reports that social workers did not always intervene or challenge what was happening in these situations.

It is an established principle in adoption work to ensure continuity for the child in the things they like to do/eat etc as the transition is made, however the reports demonstrate a lack of attention to the contrast in living situations between the foster care home and the adoptive home. The research found it was not just that there was a difference between the homes but that some differences were not anticipated before the introductions and so little work was done to address how the child might experience these changes and prepare the adopters accordingly e.g. methods and approaches to parenting, and lifestyle changes such as environmental concerns meaning only vegetarian food or no plastic toys within the home. Other issues that were not considered are wider structural issues that could affect transition e.g. class differences and moving from rural to urban locations (and vice versa).

KEY MESSAGES

In discussing the findings with adopters and professionals, they identified the following key messages:

- **Centre the child** - stop and consider what is known about the child now, not just the historical information. Reflect what this may mean for the future and prepare the child accordingly providing appropriate support.
- **Invest in all relationships** - when there are poor or faltering relationships, this has implications for the strength and value of the communication in the network which impacts on the outcomes for the child. The UEA Moving to Adoption Model can help this process.

KEY MESSAGES CONTINUED

- **Rethink the 'who and how' of support** – Consideration needs to be given to providing a wider range of support to children, adopters and foster carers utilising informal support through family networks and adoption peers, in addition to therapeutic and more formal approaches to support.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recommendation 1:** Approach assessments for children as dynamic pieces of work that should be regularly reflected upon and evidenced.

- **Recommendation 2:** Approach the assessment of adopters as fluid in which assumptions are regularly tested and evidenced.

- **Recommendation 3:** There is a need for more consistent and robust early support through transition and into the placement.

- **Recommendation 4:** Support the implementation of best practice guidance on managing transitions using the UEA Moving to Adoption Model.

- **Recommendation 5:** Ensure support for adoptive parents when a placement disrupts.

- **Recommendation 6:** Give greater consideration and support to the role of the foster carer.

- **Recommendation 7:** Social Work England and/or Adoption England to consider how to develop and support the capacity of children's social workers in adoption work.

- **Recommendation 8:** Ensure parity across agencies in terms of availability and access to early assessment and support services.

- **Recommendation 9:** Annual thematic overviews such as the example given by East Midlands Adoption Agency should be conducted as a matter of course.

- **Recommendation 10:** A national dissemination plan with accountability for embedding learning from the disruption overview reports should be developed by the Department for Education and implemented by Adoption England and the RAAs.

THIS RESEARCH

As far as we are aware, this is the first time (both nationally and internationally) that any researcher has had access to the number and range of in-depth disruption reports analysed allowing greater insight into the detail of disruptions. The reports were written by third parties, and our analysis was a step removed from practice therefore the learning we identified was dependent on how the original author interpreted the data and information during the disruption meeting. The focus groups and workshops with professionals and adopters were helpful in triangulating the information and identifying the actions that can be valuable and supportive when issues arise.

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