

CULTURE OF SERVICES
VS
ADOPTERS

THE POTATO GROUP

Culture of Services vs Adopters

BARRIERS TO ADOPTERS AND PROFESSIONALS SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE

As adoptive parents since 1996, Adoption Panel members for many years, and founder members of POTATO, we should like to make the following observations. Most of the adoptive parents we have come across show: -

TALENT: Pre-approval assessment and training thought they would make good parents

WISDOM: There are bucket loads of wisdom within the POTATO group

COURAGE: Facing the many challenges their adoptees throw at them

LUCK: For many adopters this is the missing ingredient, it can be a postcode lottery to have the good fortune to find a supportive, empathetic, knowledgeable professional (who is also supported by their managers and organization). One weak link can undermine all the progress already made.

Our adoptees can be very complex and if professionals don't see the complexity there is the temptation to blame our parenting and believe there is a quick fix.

HOW CAN ADOPTERS AND PROFESSIONALS WORK MORE EFFECTIVELY TOGETHER TO MEET THE NEEDS OF OUR COMPLEX CHILDREN?

Most Social Workers, Mental health workers and SENCOs start with the best of motives, wanting to make a difference to the lives, prospects and happiness of young people and their adoptive families. Why then do so many adoptive parents feel blamed, neglected and angry about their encounters with professionals when they seek help and support?

Adopting a child from the Care system, who has been traumatised in utero and in their early years, is not easy. Margot Sunderland describes adoptive parenting as one of the most difficult jobs in the world. Kate Cairns compares it with extreme sport (but extreme sports aren't unrelenting for years). Sir Martin Narey describes meeting many adoptive parents who are heroes determined to support their children and get their needs understood.

To parent our adoptees we need the qualities of Michael Morpurgo's Firework-maker's daughter –
Talent, Wisdom, Courage and Luck

DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS

We see our child's chaotic inner world, fear and distress needing nurturing and therapeutic re-parenting.

They see his volatile behaviours to be stamped out and controlled.

We see our skills, energy and resourcefulness in adapting to this very challenging parenting.

They see our kindness, compassion and adaptability as a failure to put firm boundaries in place.

We explain our child's early trauma history and lack of cause and effect thinking which means rewards and consequences are ineffective.

They see us excusing our child's behaviour and refusing to follow their parenting advice.

AN EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES MENTALITY

The most corrosive attitude is to be deluded about excellence, to pretend that something is wonderful when it is really second rate or worse.

Agencies uncritically appraise other agencies of having expertise, or offering substantial support.

'Expert's reports' even when based on errors of fact are given disproportionate weight.

Adopters describe attending hours of meetings but little practical support being put in place.

THE ISSUES ADOPTIVE PARENTS FACE IN SEEKING A PRODUCTIVE DIALOGUE WITH SERVICES

- Adopters would like a **listening, thinking culture** - rather than a blaming culture. Poverty of thought in services. It takes time, effort, and preparation to think about what this individual child needs. Parents do that – professionals less so.
- **Limited understanding** of adopted children, the effects of trauma in utero and in the early years. Limited understanding of adoptive parents multiple roles as therapeutic parents, educators, emotional regulators, coordinators of care etc. as well as working and earning a living. A need to listen and prioritise a family's own assessment of their situation.
- Parents **can't tell it how it really is** because they won't be understood. Are we inarticulate? No – few could explain it better but they can't hear a word we are saying. It is beyond their experience. Preconceptions make it hard to hear what is being said e.g. child to parent violence or the context of traumatic re-enactment such as sexualized touching.
- **Professional assumptions** that parents are a significant cause of their children's difficulties failing to acknowledge that adoptive parents are living their children's imported trauma. Little change in 10 years since workshop feedback in 'Adoption Today' April 2004. Parents are key to child's welfare, Parents should be supported not fought against – let's work together.

- Parents trying to parent the most challenging children spend so much time dealing with authorities being obstructive and blaming and undermining them. We want to spend that time with our children **knowing we are understood and supported** so we do not burn out. We need agencies that understand our children's needs and fulfill their duties to our children and to us, their parents and carers e.g. right to a full time education, reasonable adjustments (disability/equality legislation), carers rights to work, education and leisure.
- Evaluation: prospective adopters are asked for feedback on assessment and Adoption Panel but no feedback seems to be welcome later. As Sally Donovan describes in her excellent article for Community Care (March 2016), **why do LAs not learn from our experiences of services when things have gone wrong?**
- **Little regard for TRUTH and ACCURACY.** Few attempts to verify information or give evidence for opinions which once written in formal reports are read as 'truth'. Parents rarely given the chance to correct errors of fact.
- **Prejudicial opinions stated as fact.** Fiction re-stated often enough acquires a patina of truth. It is hard to trust those who do not take truth seriously.
- **Respect parents' knowledge and understanding,** particularly knowledge of their child and their family, knowledge of adoption through reading, attending courses and conferences and from discussion with other adopters. Often by the time adopters request help and support their knowledge exceeds that of professionals.
- **Groupthink** – in meetings dominant attendees views are accepted uncritically. Consensus is the easy option, no one screams 'bull shit' when discussion shows ignorance or lack of analytical thought. No respect that the parents may be doing as well as possible given the complexity of their child's needs. What can services provide to help and support?.

Language is important, an indication of the mindset of the person using the words.

Services' Words

Placement

Make excuses for behaviour

Intervention implies need to change, control and putting services between parent and child

Child won't engage

Adopters' Words

Family

Explain the reasons for behaviour

Support and help

Professionals need to understand the child in order to find an approach that enables the child to engage

- **Disregard history** – the past needs to be remembered. If you don't know where you are coming from, and if you don't know where you are, then you don't know where you are going. And if you don't know where you are going you are probably going wrong. The past gives future days meaning.
- **Double standards.** If parents take a child out of school for holidays, or fail to send a child to school parents are reprimanded/punished. LA deprives a child of months/years of a full-time education with impunity. A child bruised by restraints in school - if parents had sent him to school with similar injuries they would have been subject to a child protection investigation – who investigates the LA?
- **Diffuse or lack of responsibility/accountability.** Serious case reviews – often no one to blame for incident because so many people involved. Family may be faced with many professionals involved, changing personnel, lots of talking, innumerable meetings but no commitment to action.

Too often the complex needs of the child are not recognised and requests for help can result in safeguarding investigations, searching for parenting inadequacies in the adoptive parents.

This situation harms the child sometimes leading to them being removed from the only safe base they have known – a safe base that it has taken years of re-parenting to build.

It harms family cohesion.

And harms the adoptive parents. It can have lasting effects on the adopters' mental health and employment, all leading to feelings of betrayal and loss of trust in professionals.

These issues are longstanding – in April 2004 Adoption Today (Adoption UK magazine) reported on a workshop about adoption support. They recommended that

- prioritise a family's own assessment of their situation
- give families the confidence to tell it like it is
- acknowledge the underlying assumption in many authorities that 'parents are a significant cause of their children's difficulties' and the barriers that this can create for adoptive parents who are living with the imported pathology of their children.

Over a decade later these assumptions remain very much in evidence.

The UN Charter on the Rights of the Child states:

1. The charter does not take responsibility away from parents and give it to governments.
2. Children have the right to live with their parents.
3. There is a responsibility on governments to provide support services to parents.

Joint guidance from NICE and SCIE state that authorities should promote stable attachments and nurturing relationships leading to a sense of permanence.

These principles on children's rights seem to be ignored and authorities show little commitment in seeking to promote the child's and family's best interests: **is this because they fail to accept the adoptive family as a real family?**

In adoption, the granting of the Adoption Order creates a permanent family. Lack of understanding from Social Workers that there were significant safeguarding reasons for permanently ending the Birth Parent's Parental Responsibility can lead to unplanned and ill thought out encouragement of direct birth family contact by emotionally immature adolescent adoptees including in situations where the birth family continue to pose a risk.

OUR EXPECTATIONS AS ADOPTIVE PARENTS

To be treated with honesty, integrity, fairness and respect.

To be supported by a listening, thinking culture rather than a blaming culture.

For our in depth understanding and expertise about our family, adoption and trauma to be acknowledged. In our experience adopters have often read more, attended more conferences and courses and gained expertise by peer support from other adopters to a far greater degree than the professionals from whom they seek support.

To understand our unwavering commitment to the care of our children. We did not enter into adoption lightly. The Adoption Order created a permanent lifelong family not a 'placement' to be terminated at will.

Faced with re-parenting some of the most damaged and most challenging children, we expect support commensurate with their level of need and that agencies will act in a way so as to do no harm to children.

We expect the LA to seek our feedback on our experiences and to apologise for mistakes made. Instead we face **no correction, no retraction, and no apology.**

An awareness that parents are central to their child's needs being met – to support this relationship and not undermine it.

We expect professionals to offer strategies to support our parenting and have the openness and expertise to enhance and further improve on proposals from parents.

Agencies to attend meetings properly prepared with knowledge of the child, their family and the range of services which might be able to support them. Parents are frequently excluded from 'professionals meetings', where many attending may not have met the child and do not know their full history. Without the parents there these knowledge gaps cannot be filled.

A parent's duty is to nurture, protect and educate our children and it is our children's right. We have an expectation of support in fulfilling this duty. We expect agencies to do nothing to damage the relationship between children and their adoptive family

WHAT WE DO NOT EXPECT

To feel helpless, caught up in a meaningless, implacable system.

To have to protect our children from the LA which does not understand their needs, denies their right to full-time education or seeks to remove them from our care through the courts.

Services are unused to scrutiny of their behaviour and actions and often seem to act in a despotic, autocratic fashion, trying to ride roughshod over parents whose knowledge, understanding, and total commitment to their children they see as a threat. We need to stand firm.

Sir Martin Narey, in response to a Times article 9.3.15 about a single adopter whose child returned to care due to the extreme challenges her adopted son posed, said 'You can sense the grief and guilt as you read it – but she shouldn't feel like that. Adopters frequently take a badly damaged child. They are heroes and need practical and moral support.'

In the same article the journalist Helen Rumbelow asks 'Why should adopters feel blamed when we ask of them what we seldom ask of ourselves – to look after the most hard to parent children?'

Arguably we adoptive parents feel blamed because we are blamed and we would like this to change.