LONG-TERM FOSTERING OR ADOPTION? A RESEARCH REVIEW

Ben Grey, Children's Guardian, Independent Social Work Consultant and member of NAGALRO Council

The question of whether a child should be placed for adoption, or whether another plan is in the interests of the child, such as long-term fostering, kinship care, or staying with current foster carers under a residence order, is often a very troubling one for the Courts and those advising them. The stakes are high for parents and children, and even local authorities. Recent times have seen a politically driven 'push' for adoption, with the Prime Minister's review of adoption and the ensuing local authority targets. This may well have brought benefits, highlighting the variations around the country in the use of adoption and the tendency of children in some local authorities to 'drift' without a long-term plan (Lowe *et al.*, 2002).

However, this drive raises the danger that plans for children will become policy-driven rather than determined by the best interests of the individual child concerned. The role of the children's guardian is therefore particularly crucial, either in halting what can seem like a steam-rollered progress towards a plan for adoption by asking critically whether this really is in a particular child's interests; or by contrast applying pressure on a local authority which appears to be allowing a child to drift into staying in long-term foster care because of a lack of planning or resources. Often decisions, where not resource-driven or proceeding by default, appear based upon personal prejudices rather than upon evidence. In such an environment it is pertinent to ask whether the research has anything to assist those looking at making a more considered judgment.

Disruption Rates

The most obvious measure of whether a type of placement is 'successful' or not is by looking at rates of placement breakdown. Statistically, a child placed in long-term fostering is far more likely to suffer a placement disruption than an adopted child (Triseliotis, 2002, provides statistical comparisons). However, when examined more closely this is not as obvious as might be thought. The problem lies in the nature of the children placed for adoption and fostering, and also the characterisation of what actually is considered a long-term foster placement. Professor June Thoburn's (2002) review of the literature concludes:

> *'When age at placement and other difficulties at the time of placement are allowed for, there is no difference in breakdown rates between those placed with "strangers" for adoption and those placed long-term with foster parents not previously known to them.'*

In a similar review of the literature, although noting a significant dissenting study, Professor Triseliotis (2002) concludes:

'Because of the type of child currently being adopted or fostered, differences in breakdown rates and in adjustment between these two forms of substitute parenting are diminishing and in some age groups evening out.'

The Limits of Long-Term Fostering

The primary difficulties with long-term fostering in comparison to adoption lie elsewhere:

'The main limitation of long-term fostering is its unpredictability and the uncertain position in which the children find themselves. Taken together these conditions appear to generate longstanding feelings of insecurity and anxiety in children.' (Triseliotis, 2002)

A number of problems are identified with fostering as a solution for permanence (these are drawn from Triseliotis, 2002, Selwyn and Quinton, 2004, and Rushton, 2003).

Anxiety and Uncertainty

The legal status of long-term fostering confers no sense of permanence. There is a much greater chance of being subjected to future legal proceedings and the placement can be more easily terminated by carers, the local authority, parents (via a Court Order), or even the children themselves. This has been shown to have an unsettling effect upon both children and their carers. It is easy to see why, given that the reciprocal belief, shared by both parent and child, that the parent will always be there, is the bedrock of attachment; all attachment behaviour, whether insecure or secure, is organised around influencing that relationship.

Ambiguity of Position

This refers to the feeling of being 'in-between' families, with no one to 'belong' to, as well as fostered children feeling different and secondary to a foster carer's own children. This applies also to the foster carers' perceptions of their foster children. Both child and parent protect themselves against possible future separation and therefore do not regard the relationship in the same way. Certainly, comparisons suggest that parent–child relationships are for the most part closer in adoption than they are in fostering relationships (Selwyn and Quinton, 2004).

Local Authority Monitoring and Intervention

Foster carers in the studies were revealed to be frustrated with a system that gave them responsibility for caring for a child for years, but did not allow them to make the decisions that every parent needs to make. Children suffer from regulations that set them out as different from their peers and restrict their social

opportunities. Both feel let down by promises of support that may not be forthcoming, as well as the stress of managing changes of social worker and local authority policies and procedures.

Lack of Support Beyond the Age of 16
The support for children leaving care is patchy and it is difficult for foster carers to provide the same kind of support upon leaving home as parents do, because they often have to take new placements. Lifelong parental support is less common than with adopters.

Long-Term Fostering as a Positive Choice
However, the research is equally clear that long-term fostering can be a positive choice for some children, and should not be viewed as a *'last resort'*. Long-term fostering can still be the plan of choice, and the best arrangement, for some children. The following situations are drawn from Triseliotis, 2002, Thoburn, 2002, Schofield *et al.*, 2000, Lowe *et al.*, 2002.

Children Who Don't Want to be Adopted
Triseliotis (2002) concludes from his review of the relevant studies:

> *'Where old enough, the children must be consulted and listened to, and their views seriously considered and respected. This is also the best indicator of placement stability.'*

Dance and Rushton (2005a) conclude from their follow-up of children's views around their adoption some years previously, that there was

> *'A very small minority of young people who felt strongly that adoption was not right for them. The word "acceptance" was used frequently by both well settled and less integrated young people, but in the case of the latter it was usually that they could not "accept" their being adopted. The way they spoke suggested that this had been a long-held belief.'* [Emphasis added.]

The study therefore emphasised the importance of ascertaining and listening to children's views prior to their adoption. Thoburn (2002) also points out the mix in children's views of adoption and fostering in her review of the research, and emphasises the importance of listening to children in preventing placement breakdown:

> *'A major reason for placement breakdown is that the child was not emotionally willing to be placed with a new family, but was not enabled to say so.'* [Or, presumably, was not listened to when he or she did say so.]

Those Closely Attached to their Carers
The number of moves a child has made in care directly relates to the chances of placement disruption in either long-term fostering or adoption (Dance and

Rushton, 2005b). It is easy to understand why this is so, given the impact of disrupted attachments upon children. Children can find a strategy to exert some control over an insecure, even abusing, parent, but once they learn that they can be moved from an attachment figure there is no strategy that can give them back some control (other than to reject everyone and rely on self). It is therefore wise to consider attachments to existing carers, if there is a chance that this might form a long-term placement. Thoburn comments:

> *'In an increasing number of cases, placement with the present foster family is confirmed as a "family-for-life" placement, in some cases with the child leaving care through adoption or a residence order. In 2001 14% of adoptions were by the foster parents.… If research studies include foster care adoptions (as is often the case with US studies), breakdown rates tend to be lower than when the research only includes placements with previously unknown families. In some cases the short-term foster placement is confirmed at a review as a long-term or "family-for-life" foster placement and attempts to return the child home or find an alternative family cease. There has been a reluctance to take this step in the past, so research cohorts are not readily identifiable and* robust evidence on outcome is not yet available.*' [Emphasis added.]

This is an area that requires careful attention and assessment, as I have seen attachments to foster carers both ignored and exaggerated in Court cases in which I have been involved. Infants develop an attachment in the first six to nine months of life, but they have an inbuilt need and capacity to do so. At other stages of development, when a child's (or adult's) attachments are fully formed, the process takes considerably longer. The child has other significant developmental needs that should normally take priority over attachment and their responses to new carers will be based upon the expectations learned from early experiences. However, without wishing to set any hard and fast rules, once a child has been with a foster parent upwards of a year to 18 months, where a particular placement has 'worked' against the odds, or where a child is expressing clear views, the importance of this relationship to the child should receive careful attention and assessment.

Children Needing a High Level of Birth Family Involvement
In the current climate it would be unrealistic to look for adopters willing to manage high levels of birth family contact, given the need of adopters to consider children as part of their own families. This is especially the case where contact involves parents who have been violent, as fears about keeping confidentiality will rule out most potential adopters. Similarly, children with positive and extended birth family contact often find adoption difficult *(see above)*, because they do not want to belong to another family. Clearly, the difficult issue here is determining

whether contact is needed, and at what level, and the extent to which this outweighs other factors.

The research on this issue is complex and controversial, and only a brief summary of important issues is possible here. As a general statement, direct contact with birth parents in permanent placement improves placement outcomes for children (Neil *et al.*, 2004, Fratter *et al.*, 1991). There is no evidence that face to face contact with birth parents necessarily interferes with the forming of new attachments to permanent carers (Glaser, 2004, Neil *et al.*, 2004). Some (usually older) children cannot invest in a new relationship without continuing involvement with people who are important to them (Thoburn, 2002). However, contact that a child does not want, which reawakens trauma for the child, where the child is enlisted in caring for the parent, or where the birth parent attends irregularly or rejects the child, is often associated with problematic placements and possible disruptions (Macaskill, 2002, Howe and Steele, 2004, Neil and Howe 2004).

Older Children with Severe Emotional and Behavioural Needs

Although common, this is questioned as a valid reason by some researchers because it appears to assume a lack of appropriate support to meet those needs amongst adopters, which could and should be addressed (Lowe *et al.,* 2002), and because foster carers are often let down by broken promises of support, as well as lacking the freedom and resources that adopters have to seek their own solutions (Selwyn and Quinton, 2004). However, in decision-making for children a pragmatic approach is needed, taking resources as they are, or as they are likely to be. Disruption rates of children placed with professional foster carers are generally lower, despite these services often dealing with more troubled children. Such services may provide extra support to carers, or therapeutic services tailored to a child's specific needs which might not be possible in either a local authority foster placement, or with adopters. Delay is noted in many studies as a significant factor in subsequent placement disruption and poorer outcomes for children (for example, Dance and Rushton, 2005b), and so a realistic assessment of the likelihood of placement for adoption and the timescales involved is advised, particularly given the child's likely growing attachment to his or her current carers *(see above)*.

Multiple Sibling Placements

Whilst it is often the case that siblings are split to speed the adoption of younger (and more easily placed) siblings, it should not be assumed that this is best for the children concerned, without some prior assessment of the importance to the children of those sibling relationships. Placement of children together is generally associated with better outcomes (Thoburn, 2002), although Dance and Rushton (2005b) note that these findings are influenced by the fact that singly placed

children are often children who have suffered from preferential rejection by their birth family, which itself is a factor in placement disruption. However, the importance of sibling relationships, and the sense of loss arising from broken sibling relationships, is strongly indicated by research with adults who have been parted from siblings through adoption (Mullender and Pavlovic, 1999). This is even the case regarding siblings who have never known each other.

Attachment to a sibling may often have been a critical protective factor for a child who has suffered maltreatment, even though exposure to danger may distort such sibling relationships. Preservation of these attachments may go some way towards mitigating issues of loss and promoting resilience, by allowing at least some continuity. The child is enabled to *'transplant'* into a new family by being allowed to remain in the familiar emotional *'soil'* of the preserved sibling relationship (Gilligan, 2001). That said, in some cases, sibling relationships are so distorted as to make this detrimental, although this is the exception rather than the rule. The *BAAF Good Practice Guide* (Lord and Borthwick, 2001) lists the following as describing these kind of exceptional cases: intense rivalry and jealousy; exploitation; chronic scape-goating of one child; maintaining unhealthy alliances and family of origin conflict; maintaining unhealthy hierarchical positions; highly sexualised behaviour; and acting as triggers for each other's traumatic material and potentially re-traumatising each other. In other cases, it may be that preserving the sibling relationship is more important than ensuring that the child is adopted rather than fostered.

Towards a Child-Centred Approach to Permanence Planning
It is clear that adoption works for many children, who are then able to benefit from having a new family to which to belong and a relationship protected in law. However, too often politically driven decisions or blinkered thinking lead to 'package holiday' approaches to planning that demonstrate inflexible thinking (such as 'If you're under five, it's adoption without direct contact; if you're over five, it's adoption with contact; and if you're over ten or we can't place you, it's long-term fostering'). Long-term fostering suits many children, either because it is clear that they are unlikely to enjoy the benefits that adoption often provides, or because something that suits them is only achievable through a fostered relationship. For some children, it will be the opportunity to continue a relationship with a family member that might be impossible or too greatly restricted by adoption. For others, fostering represents an opportunity to continue relationships with a carer who has become their source of support and security, with siblings to whom they are attached, or to continue a placement that has worked against the odds. Finally, it may be simply that the child is so set against adoption that, even with support, it could not work. The children's guardian is ideally placed to investigate these issues in some depth, and do all he or she can to

ensure that it is the particular and individual needs of the child that are at the forefront of decision-making.

References:

Dance C and Rushton A (2005a), 'Joining a new family. The views and experiences of young people placed with permanent families during middle childhood,' *Adoption and Fostering*, Vol. 25, no. 1, BAAF

Dance C and Rushton A (2005b), 'Predictors of outcome for unrelated adoptive placements made during middle childhood.' *Child and Family Social Work*, Vol. 10, pp 269–80, Blackwell Publishing

Fratter, Roe, Sapsford & Thoburn, (1991), *Permanent Family Placement: A Decade of Experience,* BAAF

Gilligan, R. (2001), *Promoting Resilience,* BAAF

Glaser D (2004), 'Contact and Children's Well-Being', presentation at CAFCASS conference, Birmingham, June 2004

Howe D and Steele M (2004). 'Contact in cases where children have been traumatically abused' in Neil and Howe eds, *Contact in Adoption andPermanent Foster Care,* BAAF

Lord, J and Borthwick S (2001) *Together or Apart? Assessing Brothers and Sisters for Permanent Placement,* BAAF

Lowe N, Murch M, Bader K, Borkowski M, Copner R, Lisles C and Shearman J, *The Plan for the Child: Adoption or Long-Term Fostering,* BAAF

Macaskill, C (2002), *Safe Contact – Children in permanent placement and contact with their birth relatives,* Russell House

Mullender A and Pavlovic A (1999), 'Adult Birth Siblings – Who are they and why do they search', in Mullender (ed), *We are family*, BAAF

Neil, E and Howe D (2004), 'Conclusions, a transactional model for thinking about contact', in Neil and Howe (eds), *Contact in Adoption and Permanent Foster Care,* BAAF

Neil *et al.* (2004) 'Contact issues in permanent family placement', workshop held on 11 February 2004 at the Policy Studies Institute, London, and facilitated by: Beth Neil , Lecturer in Social Work, University of East Anglia; Norwich Workshop report written by Lisa Keay, Research Officer, research in practice, www.rip.org.uk

Rushton A (2003), *The Adoption of Looked-After Children*, SCIE

Rushton A, Dance C, Quinton D and Mayes D (2001), *Siblings in Late Permanent Placements*, BAAF

Schofield G, Beck M, Sargent K, and Thoburn J (2000), *Growing Up in Foster Care,* BAAF

Selwyn J and Quinton D (2004), 'Stability, Permanence, Outcomes and Support – Foster Care and Adoption Compared', *Adoption and Fostering,* Vol. 28, No. 4, pp.6–15

Thoburn, J. 2002, 'Adoption and Permanence for Children Who Cannot Live Safely with Birth Parents or Relatives', *Quality Protects Research Briefing,* no. 5, Research in Practice, www.rip.org.uk

Triseliotis, J (2002), 'Long-Term Foster Care or Adoption? The Evidence Examined', *Child and Family Social Work,* Vol. 7, pp.23–33, Blackwell Science