Joining a new family: The views and experiences of young people placed with permanent families during middle childhood

Cherilyn Dance and Alan Rushton report on the views of a group of young people who had joined adoptive or foster families some six years previously when they were between five and 11 years old (the Maudsley Follow-Up Study). The report focuses on the experience of joining a new family, family relationships and feelings of belonging. It was striking that it could take some young people a considerable length of time to feel settled; however, by the follow-up stage the great majority felt very much a part of their family. Several described their placement as an opportunity for a ‘new start’. A small minority was less settled and expressed continued discomfort with their adoptive status. The authors discuss the direction of current practice and policy developments with reference to these findings.

Introduction

Although a considerable amount of research has been conducted on young people who have been placed for adoption and those living in long-term foster care, hearing the views of those young people directly is rather rare. The interviews undertaken by Thomas and Beckford (1999) were something of a milestone in adoption research, in that they explored the views of the children themselves who were over five years old at the time of the adoption hearing. This study was undertaken primarily to feed into the policy reviews being undertaken by central government at the time. The major remit of the interviews was to examine children’s experience of the adoption process; although they touched on relationships in the adoptive family, they did so mainly from the point of view of how family members offered support to the children.

The research reported here compares with that of Thomas and Beckford in that it was descriptive rather than hypothesis driven, although it differs somewhat in focus. Our interest was less in those areas directly under the control of social workers or professionals and more in how young people experienced life in an adoptive or long-term foster family. The young people whose voices are introduced here are the children of some of the adopters and ‘permanent foster carers’ who agreed to take part in two prospective longitudinal studies of ‘permanent placement for older children’ that began in the 1990s.

The overall aim of the research was to deepen our understanding of the pleasures and problems arising for families and young people involved in ‘late permanent placement’. By talking to young people directly we wished to describe the views expressed by the young people some six years after placement. We focus here on the experience of joining, and becoming a part of, a new family; on child–parent relationships and day-to-day life in adoptive and long-term foster families.

Method

The sample

The young people who contributed to this phase of the research were drawn from two much larger groups. In the early and mid-1990s a total of 133 adoptive and foster families were recruited to two separate but related studies of permanent placement (Quinton et al., 1998; Rushton et al., 2001). The studies aimed for a relatively homogenous sample that was representative of local authority placements from care. Between them the 133 families had 223 children placed with them. In each case at least one of the children was between five and 11 years old at placement. All of the placements were with new and unrelated families and the intention behind each was for permanence, either through a plan for adoption (true for most) or long-term fostering.

We initially interviewed adoptive parents and foster carers in the very first months of placement and again at the end of the first year. Efforts were then made to contact these families again at around
six years after placement. We have described elsewhere the qualitative analysis of the parents’ views regarding the progress of the young people and family life (Rushton and Dance, 2004) and have presented an analysis of the factors which predict the character of the placement (Dance and Rushton, in press). In the course of the follow-up we tried also to obtain information from the young people directly.

The proportion of young people contributing to this research was relatively small in comparison to the numbers included in the original studies, although, as far as we can judge, they are fairly representative of the whole group (see Table 1). Of the 223 children who were originally placed with participating families, we were able to discover whether or not the placements were continuing for all but three. At the time of follow-up, 44 young people (20 per cent) were no longer with the family. Of the other 176 young people, a total of 76 (43 per cent) took part in the follow-up in some way, 47 completed questionnaires and 29 took part in face-to-face interviews. Most of the material presented here is drawn from the 29 interviews with young people. We shall make it clear when the responses of the larger group are included.

Data collection
Contact with the young people at follow-up relied on their parents being prepared to pass our information and questionnaires to their children. Some parents stated immediately that they were unwilling to approach their children, others said they were prepared to read it themselves and then make a decision. We are therefore unable to say what proportion of young people refused to be involved in the research. It is often the case in social research that access to respondents is gained via a ‘gatekeeper’. Although those interviewed were representative of the whole group in ways we could measure, we embarked on the analysis fully aware that the willingness of the parents and young people to be involved may be indicative of a difference in experience that we cannot measure.

In planning our work with young people we consulted methodological and ethical texts for guidance (Mauthner, 1997). We were aware of the ‘unequal power relationships’ in the interview setting (Claveiroule, 2004) and also paid particular attention to potentially sensitive areas such as discussion of the birth family.

The interview schedule used with young people was based on the CAFÉ (Child and Adolescent Functioning and Environment schedule – John and Quinton, 1991). This semi-structured interview schedule covers a range of psycho-social difficulties from the young person’s own viewpoint as well as a number of questions about family life and relationships. The standard schedule was supplemented with material relevant to placed children such as questions about birth family contact or social work support. However, we concentrate here on recollections of joining and settling with the new family, relationships within the current family and feelings of ‘belonging’ to the new family. For those who completed questionnaires only, the section relevant to this paper was a series of open questions on settling into a new family and being adopted or fostered.

Analysis
Many of the interview items were pre-coded and this approach enabled us to calculate the proportion of young people for whom a given statement may be true. From the audio recordings of the interviews detailed summaries were made of the young person’s views and direct quotations were recorded wherever appropriate. The summaries included an overview of the young person’s placement experience and an assessment of their degree of self-confidence in the interview setting. These summaries were then imported into a qualitative analysis programme (N-Vivo, 1999) and coded for themes. The written responses of young people responding to questionnaires were similarly imported into the N-Vivo package. This material is used here to emphasise and to illustrate the views of the young people.
Findings

Sample characteristics
A total of 29 young people took part in face-to-face interviews and 47 completed questionnaires. The characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1 according to the level of participation in the follow-up exercise. It is often the case that ‘self-selected’ sub-samples may not represent the group as a whole but we were pleased to find that this was not true here. Of all the factors we were able to test for, only four areas showed a significant difference between the groups.

A smaller proportion of the interview group joined families that were ‘child free’ at the time of placement. A greater number of young people who participated by completing questionnaires had experienced either neglect or emotional abuse prior to their entry into care. And finally this sub-group was also a little older at placement, by an average of seven or eight months, than either the interview group or those who did not take part. Although these differences are clearly statistically significant, neither their type nor their extent would seem to suggest any specific bias. Of particular importance is the fact that the young people whose placements had been described by their parents/carers as rather more challenging than most were proportionately represented when compared with the original sample as a whole.

Most of the young people (90 per cent) were aged between 11 and 17 years at the time of follow-up, although there were five ten-year-olds and two in their late teens. Overall 39 boys and 37 girls participated in some way. Just eight of the 76 young people were of a minority ethnic background. The placements of 16 of the 76 young people were originally intended to be for long-term foster care, although half of these had proceeded to adoption by follow-up. Sadly, the number of young people in foster placements and the proportion of young people of minority ethnic background were too small for any meaningful analysis of differences in experience.

All of the young people had experienced some adversity in their early years and had encountered loss.

Table 1
Participation at follow-up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>None (n=100)</th>
<th>Questionnaire (n=47)</th>
<th>Interview (n=29)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tr>
<td>% male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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<tr>
<td>% white British</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% joined child-free families</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% placed with a sibling</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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<td>% sexually abused</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% physically abused</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% neglected</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% emotionally abused</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at placement (mths)</td>
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<td>89</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% ‘more difficult’ placement *</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
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Adoption status

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<th>Interview (n=29)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% foster placement but adopted</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
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<td>% adoptive placement and adopted</td>
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<td>% adoptive placement, not adopted</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Placement categorised as ‘more difficult’ at follow-up according to rating of parents responses n=165 (Rushton and Dance, 2004)
well known that young people dealing with such experiences often struggle with longer-term disadvantage in terms of their learning and social skills. Thus, like any group of people, they varied in character, ability and willingness to talk at length to a researcher. A minority of those who were interviewed were described by their interviewer as ambivalent or somewhat inconsistent in the way that they responded to some questions; as a result some reports were thought to be less reliable than others in particular areas. As will be seen, the confusion and ambivalence felt by some young people occasionally shows in their words, but perhaps this serves to help rather than hinder our understanding of young people’s dilemmas and perspectives.

Rather than presenting case studies, we have chosen to explore the variety of responses to our selected topic of interest. Thus, most sections contain a series of quotes that illustrate individual views or experiences. We have not quoted from all of those who participated, since there was much duplication, but we have endeavoured to ensure that the spread of views is represented. When we use young people’s words we have taken the liberty of sometimes changing sexes and family sizes or other potentially identifying information, as long as this did not change the sense or the implication of the example.

**Becoming part of a new family**

We begin by exploring the young people’s memories of what it was like to join a new family. Those who were helping with the research were no strangers to moving home. On average they had spent over 3.5 years in care before being placed for permanence (range 0.5-10.3 years, sd=2) and half the sample had experienced four or more moves of placement and one-tenth had had ten or more moves (maximum 17).

We first examined the responses of the young people who provided written comments. It could clearly be potentially upsetting to a young person to be confronted with blunt written questions about the extent to which they felt themselves to be part of their family. Therefore we asked them to reflect on what they remembered as being easy and what was difficult about joining their new family. A total of 37 young people responded to the first of these items. Most of them (23) identified something that made the transition easier, although one emphasised the difficult adjustment:

*It was hard to get used to it, but really I was too young to understand. But I think it was easy because more people cared for me.*

Six young people felt that nothing about the transition had been easy and eight said they couldn’t remember. Of those finding something positive to say, the commonest response (nine young people) was remembering the welcome that their arrival prompted – not just from the immediate family members but extended family and friends. For example:

*What was easy about joining your new family? My mum and dad of now were very welcoming and so were both of their families.*

The facilities and opportunities they would now have access to were important to some: such as people to share activities with or a garden to play in. The comments of five young people suggested that it was a belief in future security and reliability of care that eased the transition for them. Two expressed relief at leaving behind the uncertainty of foster care and two emphasised the importance to them of a ‘new beginning’. One young person stressed that the presence of his brother had made it easier. He commented poignantly that it was easy ‘because I was used to moving families anyway!’

What made it difficult? The most common response, true for 24 young people, was the question of not knowing people, not knowing what might happen or what was expected. Uncertainties mostly focused on living with new parent figures, but several also highlighted anxieties about new schools, new house rules, being in a new environment and having to make new friends. Four talked about it being hard to leave their previous foster carers. A couple mentioned worry-
ing about how to behave and whether they might have to return to foster care. One recalled finding it difficult because her younger siblings were upset by the move.

We were able to develop these questions in more detail in an interview setting. Thinking about settling into the new family and levels of integration, we found that most of the young people felt themselves reasonably comfortable in the family. However, the ease and speed of the transition between previous foster home and the permanent placement varied a good deal. Twelve young people remembered settling quickly and easily into their new family. For three, it all happened quite rapidly but it was recalled as a difficult time. The remaining 13 all found it took a long while to feel settled; seven of them described it as both a slow and a difficult process.

One young woman, who was very settled in her family at the time of follow-up, described the move and the process of settling in this way:

I could get out of my childhood, the bad parts of my childhood and start again . . . But it took quite a long time getting my head round it [having a new family]. It took a long time for me to say 'mum' and 'dad' to them because it didn’t feel natural. It just felt weird saying mum and dad to another person but after a while . . . a couple of months, I started calling them mum and dad but it still took a long time to get my head round that they were actually my mum and dad.

A young man who found it took longer to settle with the family talked about the early months as follows:

A bit worrying . . . about seeing new people and having a new nana and stuff . . . [I felt I had really settled] after five or so years, when I got used to everything.

Another had this to say:

It was hard moving, from being [with the foster carers] such a long time . . . I’d been shifted around quite a lot. Getting used to the fact that this is your mum and dad now and you won’t go anywhere else . . .

Of course it isn’t just the immediate family that changes. The comments of this young man emphasise that everything and everyone in life is new for a while:

Settling in and that. Answering to all your friends questions when you appear on the street, wanting to know who you are, like . . . Why were you adopted? Why? . . . stuff like that, which I sometimes find really hard to answer.

Uncertainty about the future and doubts about acceptance characterised the experience of moving home:

After about a day or two I got used to them and thought, ‘Yeah, I’ll stay here.’

Although some insecurity persisted:

Is it like all the other places – they’ll get rid of me and I’ll move on again? But it hasn’t ended up like that!

I was here for three years and I kept thinking, ‘Do they or don’t they?’ but now I know they do [love me].

It is not surprising that these young people recall feelings of anxiety, for when they joined their families they were, for the most part, between five and 11 years old. Many had memories of multiple moves within the care system and now they were told that this was going to be ‘forever’. Most had met their new parents and carers at least a few times in a series of ‘introductions’ before the move but they were still essentially being asked to put their trust in strangers. This is perhaps not news to those who have worked directly with young people in transition but it does serve as a reminder that while professionals may come into contact with a number of such cases, each individual child faces an obstacle course. There would not seem to be an easy way to relieve entirely the challenges of this transition stage, but it is a salutary lesson to be reminded of how it must feel initially and how long it can take to feel secure. Set alongside the anxieties, there is a strong impression in the comments of several young people of the placement
being seen as ‘an opportunity to start again’.

We did not ask specifically about social work help during the preparation for and transition to the new family. However, a number of the comments made during the social work section of the interview were pertinent to this stage. ‘They could explain more . . . explain what’s going on in more detail’ was not an unusual comment. The experience of this one young man was perhaps unusual but his words encapsulate perfectly his obvious feeling of bewilderment:

Really I was just left here. [The foster carers] who I had before, they just said, ‘You’re coming for a long sleep-over.’ So far it’s been for the rest of my life.

One young woman’s experience was very different. Her social worker had given her a toy to talk to and suggested that she used a scrapbook to write down her experiences during introductions. In her own words:

She made it easier between foster homes – being kind, saying it wasn’t my fault . . . explaining it in very simple words to me what was going to happen so I knew all the way along.

This same young person clearly valued the honesty and respect with which the social worker had discussed her intended move to the new family:

She did give me the choice whether I liked them [the adoptive family]. If I hadn’t liked them then it wouldn’t have gone through . . . She did warn me that I had to be saying no for the right reason and not just because I wanted to stay with [foster carer] . . . If I didn’t say yes then I’d be moved on again to another foster home where I might not like it . . . So I suppose that affected a little bit my decision.

Being part of the family

We move at this point to looking at the experiences of the interview group alone. Although the process of settling in was different for different people, when asked about their feelings of integration with the family at the time of follow-up, most of those we interviewed responded positively, rating themselves at 9 or 10 on a scale of 1–10. A typical comment was:

They’ve accepted me as their daughter and I’ve accepted them as my mum and dad.

Slightly more guarded was:

Nine-and-three-quarters ‘cos there’s always a bit of me that didn’t really know who my birth mum and dad was. I’ve always felt like that. It’s just strange but I’ve got used to it.

A small group of five young people in the interview sample spoke of feeling as though they really didn’t belong or, perhaps more to the point, didn’t really want to belong to the family.

One participant’s responses to questions about relationships ran as follows:

Not like a real dad. I just treat him like a person looking after me, not as a real dad. I love him but not like I used to love my real dad . . . I don’t want to be adopted. I just want to be with a normal family. I want to be born into the family and stay there and not be taken away . . . I don’t want to be part of the family but then they want me to and I can’t. I just find it hard living here. I got really settled into one family and then I had to move again and I don’t find it easy living in new families.

A second young person echoed these views:

I’ll never accept her as my mum because she isn’t to me. I mean I don’t really love my real mum either but I don’t accept her as my mum.

Ten of the 29 young people who were interviewed talked about times when they had seriously felt that they wouldn’t be able to remain in the placement. In only one of these cases had anything about leaving ever been mentioned by a parent. But for some their automatic response

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when they thought, or knew, they had misbehaved was to plan to move on. Some talked of how, when something had gone wrong, they would literally ‘climb the stairs and start to pack’ in the early days of placement and one young woman said she would take her bag and stand outside the garden gate on these occasions. Of course, a memory of ‘packing one’s bags’ in childhood is not that unusual: anecdotal evidence suggests it is an experience that many of us have as we practise asserting our independence. However, one can imagine this having a somewhat different meaning for those who had been moved around in the past. One young person, who had previously described how her early months in placement were dominated by a fear of being ‘chucked out again’, talked of a row with her adoptive mother after which she ‘cried and cried’. She told her new mother that she wanted to leave but the response, which may have been a turning point for her, was ‘NO YOU’RE NOT – YOU’RE STAYING HERE!’ She went on to say that one morning she woke up and thought, ‘Oh well, I can’t be scared [of being chucked out] for the rest of my life.’

For all but the five young people previously mentioned, these responses were spoken of in the past tense, but they were still live issues for the five who each cited repeated periods of feeling that they wanted to leave the placement.

**Parent–child relationships**

The young people’s perspectives regarding their relationships with their parents (or carers) and the overall harmony of family life were sought in the face-to-face interviews. Overall, we found that 20 of the 29 young people we spoke to reported good relationships with both of their parents. Three had a good relationship with their mother but did not get on so well with their father and for two it was the reverse. There were four young people, however, who reported poor relationships with both parents. There was a positive and strong correlation between the level of integration reported by young people and the extent to which they felt they got on with their mothers. This was not so true for fathers.

Young people who had difficulty relationships with their mothers tended to describe them as critical and expressing relatively low levels of affection. The same was not generally true of judgements about relationships with fathers. However, we ought to stress that the numbers reporting either high criticism or low affection from either parent were very small.

**Correspondence between parents’ and young people’s views**

Although we are focused here on young people’s views, it is interesting to explore briefly the degree of correspondence with the experiences of parents and carers. This is not straightforward, as we were not basing this on a single question posed to both groups. However, of the 29 young people interviewed the placement experience had been described by parents as having been ‘more difficult’ for ten. Of these, five reported a low or fluctuating sense of being a part of the family. Four of these stated clearly that they did not want to be adopted. On the whole this did not seem to be a rejection of this particular family, although they acknowledged that there were difficulties, but rather a rejection of the adoption status. The other said little about her adoptive status. Not surprisingly there were more reports among this group of parental criticism and there was less confidence in confiding and some lack of trust towards parents.

Three of the five cases in which parent and child agreed that life was less smooth than it might have been were for young people placed as part of a sibling group: two of these groups were placed with previously child-free families. In no family were all the young people placed poorly integrated with the family as a whole, but there were significant difficulties between the young person and at least one of their birth siblings in each case. In the other two cases, where the young people were placed alone and joined families with birth children of their own, there did not seem to be particular problems in the relationships between them and their ‘new siblings’.

The five young people who felt that
they were integrated with their family but whose parents reported a difficult time were those whose behaviour seems to have posed problems for parents but who reported a good relationship with at least one and usually both of their parents.

As stated by one young person:

*I think mum and dad do treat me a little bit better than them [brothers]* . . .

*Because all of the time . . . I think I have a better relationship . . . My brothers are always out and I love spending time with them [parents].*

**Family life**

We asked the young people about their views on family life in general. Again, the bulk of young people (19) thought the emotional tone of their home life was fairly positive; seven reported a mixed picture and the responses of three were generally negative. Similar patterns were observed when we asked about family cohesiveness (defined here as doing things as a family, being interested in each other) and again when we asked about the overall level of harmony at home. Not surprisingly, there was a good deal of overlap between these items. Most of the young people reported some level of conflict between themselves and their parents, usually short lived, and typically about failure to co-operate with parental requests. The majority felt that their parents’ requests and approach to discipline were fair, although some were concerned that siblings were treated differently. In cases where we had spoken to more than one child in a family, there was often a lack of correspondence in what might be thought to be shared experiences (eg the level of harmony, the general tone of the household, etc). In one family one sibling rated the tone of the household as very irritable and tense, while the other described it very positively. It was very clear therefore that the young people’s perceptions about the day-to-day activity of ‘family life’ were not independent of their own feelings more generally or their own experience.

**Being adopted or fostered**

Young people who participated by questionnaire were asked ‘what was good’ and ‘what was difficult’ about being adopted or long-term fostered. The responses to the first question fell into two major types. The first was concerned with security and safety (9) or being better treated (5) and the second was to do with new opportunities: the prospect of meeting new people (6) and a chance to start again with a new life (5).

The question of what was difficult about being adopted or long-term fostered prompted a variety of responses. Thirty-two young people provided written responses to this question. Eight, who were clearly concentrating on the early stages of placement, felt that the newness of everything and uncertainty about people, places and expectations made for problems. Five mentioned the difficulties associated with moving homes and leaving behind previous attachments. Three felt that they were ‘picked on’, two were concerned that they were not with their birth families and two felt that difficulties arose because they thought a lot about the past – in the words of one young man: ‘Sometimes it’s hard because I churn a lot of old stuff.’ One thought that there were a lot of arguments, although she did not expand as to whether this might be more than in most families or what the arguments were about. The remaining young people (11) saw ‘nothing’ difficult about being adopted or fostered.

Exploring the same questions with the interview sample, the majority of young people echoed the sentiments of those who provided written responses. The five in this group who, as mentioned previously, did not feel part of the family found it difficult to identify good things about their circumstances. One felt there had been opportunity to make new friends and another said, ‘Since I’ve lived here I haven’t been beaten up.’

Of the 29 young people we spoke to directly, all but two had been adopted. We asked what they thought and remembered about the adoption hearing itself. Over half described this positively. Typical comments were:

*I felt really happy . . . the satisfaction of*
being [part of a] family now instead of being lost.

I thought, ‘Yes, I’m never going to leave here now. I’m going to have a proper family.’ It gives you a chance to make a new life for yourself, new family and new friends.

Ten felt that it had no impact on them. In the words of one young woman:

It’s not been an issue that I’ve been adopted . . . It’s just been normal.

Another responded with:

Couldn’t really care . . . didn’t care. I hardly knew what was going on really . . . I knew I was getting adopted, but if it was just in and out I didn’t really care.

Another expressed more anxiety about the process, which implies that the procedure itself was rather more important to her:

. . . sitting in this room with a bloke and he asked [my ‘new’ brother] what it was like having a new sister . . . and I was thinking, ‘Please answer good, please answer something nice,’ and he did! I was happy it was over and done with.

Just two young people described it negatively, as neither had wanted to be adopted:

I was sick that day and I was really upset and [the person at court] made me even more scared . . . I don’t like being adopted, because it’s bad and upsetting . . . I didn’t think it [adoption] was fair because I didn’t know my mum and dad well and I should have had more time to get to know them.

The degree of ambivalence felt by a minority of the young people about the adoption itself is demonstrated by the experience of one who had been given the task of posting the application forms off if he wanted it to go ahead. This young man told the interviewer that he didn’t want to be adopted but he did want a family and he did want to stop the social workers coming round – so he posted the forms.

Discussion

In this paper we have tried to present young people’s experience of joining a new family in middle childhood, with particular reference to relationships and feelings of belonging. We begin here by re-stating the fact that this paper is based on information from relatively few young people and that only those who continued to live with their ‘new family’ were invited to participate in the research. Forty-four of the original placements were known to have ended prematurely. Although the experiences of participants before placement were not dissimilar to those of the whole group, we must be cautious about generalising too far. Given the numbers, it was certainly not realistic to try to explore differences in experience across different sub-groups, for example between adoptive and foster placements.

Overall, the message that comes across from the majority of young people whose placement was continuing is one of satisfaction with their current circumstances. Although many found the transition to the new home a difficult and often lengthy process, most had settled and saw themselves as a part of the family, and parent–child relationships were viewed as positive and strong. They saw their placement with their new family as an opportunity and a ‘new start’.

It is worth noting that siblings placed together did not necessarily share similar perceptions of their placement. Plomin’s work on ‘non-shared environments’ has shown that children’s perceptions of their family environment or parenting behaviour or parental warmth directed at a specific child show surprisingly low agreement between siblings (Plomin and Daniels, 1987). A variety of factors will influence how individuals perceive and describe their environment. This of course links to the need for careful assessment of the needs of each child when planning for sibling groups.

Set against the largely positive reports of most of those taking part 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. Although they usually recognised that being with their birth parents wasn’t an option, these young people struggled with the question of ‘what was good about being adopted’. This finding poses three major questions: the first concerns the methods available to assess children’s views and to work with them to establish the best plan for their future. The second is whether better access to appropriate services after placement might have been helpful, and third whether a different means of securing permanency might have been more acceptable.

In thinking about working with children, we ought to re-state at this point that these young people were placed some time ago. Although at the time they were placed much was being developed in the way of direct work, ideas about working with children and encouraging their participation in the planning process have been continuously developing. For example, the Framework for Assessment (Department of Health, 2000a) and the Looking After Children system (Parker et al., 1991) each encourage a comprehensive approach to assessment and planning. These systems, which are to be brought together in the Integrated Children’s System (Department of Health, 2000b) have both been implemented subsequent to the start of the longitudinal studies reported here. These materials provide a framework to work to but do not overcome the problems associated with genuinely understanding children’s views or helping children to understand what is happening to them or what is expected of them. It is important that the process of keeping and completing comprehensive records is not allowed to obscure the primary purpose of assessment and decision-making – namely the child and what is in his or her best interests – which must take account of that child’s views.

Thomas and O’Kane (1999, 2000) have reported that children are increasingly involved in plans and decisions related to their care, but the authors are critical that the style of involvement is often not as child centred as it might be. They discuss extensively how the use of child-friendly materials can give children the opportunity to communicate effectively with a listening adult. Although the tools developed in the course of their research are available to practitioners (Thomas et al., 1999), it is not clear to what extent such tools are being used routinely. A search of several social care databases in the course of writing this paper revealed relatively few current articles about working directly with ‘looked after’ or formerly ‘looked after’ children.

The second question was about appropriate adoption services. This again has been taken on board by the Government, and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 makes it very clear that services that are sensitive to the special features of adoption need to be further developed and be available and accessible to young people and their families at all stages of the adoption process.

Finally, we raised the question of other forms of permanence. It is impossible for us to say whether the young people we talked to would have been more comfortable with a ‘special guardianship’ status (Adoption and Children Act 2002) but at least this now exists as an option that sits between the perceived finality of adoption and the potential insecurity of fostering. Such an option may suit some groups of children who might feel that adoption is not right for them.

As a postscript we should like to emphasise that the views reported here were sought of young people about their current feelings and experience. As they grow older and are able to reflect back, their views and their experience may change. Retrospective studies in adoption and foster care have shown that despite apparent difficulties, both carers and young people can gain considerably from family placement in the longer term (Howe, 1997; Schofield, 2003).
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References


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