The strengths of black families
Appropriate placements for all

The strengths which black families bring to substitute parenting have rarely been explored in detail in British social work research literature. A recent study on the permanent placement of black children in substitute families provided the opportunity to interview a number of black foster carers. Stephen Parvez Rashid reports on six black foster carers and identifies their strengths in helping the children in their care to settle in their new families, deal with issues of racism and identity and retain contact with their birth families. He concludes with a brief account of the foster carers’ support networks and their evaluation of their efforts to provide sustained care for the children.

**Introduction**

Black families have had a mixed press in Britain, both in social work and more widely. Writing well over a decade ago, Cheetham (1986) noted that ‘stereotypical beliefs about minority families persist’ and gave the following examples:

*West Indian families are weak because of some ill-understood relationship with the ways of life enforced upon them as slaves; West Indian children are said to suffer from low self-esteem because, it is argued, they have no firm cultural roots.*

*Asian parents are likely to experience insoluble conflict with their children. Muslim families will systematically suppress their female members.*

Cheetham observes that ‘there are, of course, West Indian and Asian families and individuals, and many white people, with these characteristics’. What makes such stereotypes so dangerous, she warns, is the racist belief that such characteristics are common to all or most of the members of a particular ethnic group. Her concern was that such beliefs would influence the judgement and actions of social workers, and thus adversely affect black children and families.

A decade later, Alexander (1996), writing as a black anthropologist in London, commented that:

*Images of teenage single motherhood, illegitimacy, matriarchal households, absent fathers, identity crises, gender and intergenerational conflict have all combined to construct the black family as mutilated and dysfunctional.*

Alexander points out that this construct of the dysfunctional or inadequate black family has been used to characterise the black community in the same way. Anyone holding such views, covertly or overtly, as a politician, policy-maker or practitioner, would be extremely dubious about the ability of black families, and indeed of the black communities, to provide appropriate placements for children.

In marked contrast to the negative views above, exposed by Cheetham and Alexander, have been a series of assertions about the strengths of black families. Thus Cheetham emphasises ‘strengths rooted in cultural traditions, in the survival of generations in spite of discrimination and the stresses of migration and sometimes persecution’ (p 3). In her fieldwork, Alexander described a black family she got to know closely in the following terms:

*The nuclear family itself was marked by a closeness and level of support, which was a source of strength to both its members and to those who came into contact with them; it also formed the core of a wider, more inclusive and more loosely defined notion of “family”. At its widest extent, Angelina’s family formed a network with members in Jamaica, Grenada, Canada, the United States, and Britain – a truly “diasporic” complex of relationships.*

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This ability of black families to retain strong links with family members both in Britain and abroad, and for relationships to survive over time and across thousands of miles, is a strength to which many black professionals have drawn attention. Other strengths cited by practitioners include the ability to provide positive black role models for black children and the ability to teach black children how to deal with racism. While there has been much anecdotal evidence to support these assertions, regrettably they have rarely featured in British academic social work discussion. American social science literature (Hill, 1971; McAdoo, 1988) and more recent British work (Hylton, 1997; Modood et al., 1997; Prevatt Goldstein, in press) does produce some counterbalance. This article aims to extend this by drawing on material from a recent research study.

The research study
A survey was undertaken of the total cohort of 1,165 children ‘with special needs’, who were placed in permanent substitute families by the major voluntary adoption agencies in Britain during the period 1980–84 (Thoburn and Rowe, 1991). Within that cohort 246 children were identified as being of minority ethnic origin, and these provided the basis for further research, commissioned by the Department of Health and undertaken at the University of East Anglia (Thoburn et al., 1997, and in press). Detailed qualitative work was undertaken with 38 of these families, 20 of whom were black (Thoburn et al., 1997). A full account of the methodology is given in Thoburn et al. (in press).

The black families
During the course of the research, 20 black families were interviewed, most of whom were of African-Caribbean origin. This article examines the accounts of six such families, all African-Caribbean and all providing permanent substitute placements through foster care rather than through adoption. All the foster carers lived and worked in a large urban area where black communities were strongly represented. In order to preserve confidentiality the foster carers interviewed are listed as Mrs A, B, C, D, E and F. All children, to whom any references are made, are given pseudonyms. Some general characteristics of the families are outlined, then the following topics are discussed:

- how the families came to foster black children;
- living with the children;
- dealing with issues of racism and identity;
- contact with the children’s families;
- the families’ support networks; and
- the families’ evaluation of their experiences.

Characteristics of the black families
At the time they took the children, three of the foster carers were married or co-habiting, two were separated or divorced and one was a widow. Discussion centred on eight children placed with them. Mrs A had taken a brother and sister, while Mrs C had taken two girls who were not related to each other. Several of the carers had fostered other children and all had brought up their own children. They were therefore mature, experienced parents, whose ages ranged from mid-30s to late 50s when they came into fostering in the early to mid-1980s. At the time of interview their ages ranged from their early 50s to early 70s. The children they took ranged in age from six to 18 at the time of placement – the eldest being a young man with learning disabilities, on whom the local authority had assumed parental rights, and who thus remained in care until his 19th birthday. After that, his carer became a member of the Adult Living Scheme and the young man has remained in the household. Six of the children came from residential care and five of them brought problems about their black identity, which are discussed below. Four of the foster carers have worked as nurses or nursing assistants. One trained as a social worker, another has taken courses in counselling in order to work better with the children in her care. All six came across as strong, capable
women, who were committed, with their partners and often with other members of their families, to doing their best for the children and young people. It is important to note that these families differed from the majority of the substitute families in this study, where children were placed with the intention that they would become permanent members of the new family from the start. Four of these six families initially welcomed the children into their homes on an indeterminate basis and were later confirmed as the permanent carers. The reasons for this were varied and included financial considerations (these placements predated the introduction of adoption allowances), the ages of the children involved and the widely varying circumstances surrounding the placement of these children.

**Initial involvement in fostering**

Two of the foster carers said that their interest in fostering was sparked by the suggestion of a birth child in the family. An adult daughter of Mr and Mrs D heard about the need for black foster carers through her work. She suggested to her parents that they should consider fostering. Mr and Mrs D did so and asked the advice of a friend, a black social worker who encouraged them further. Similarly, Mrs F described how one of her daughters read an article about the need for black foster carers in a black newspaper and drew it to her attention. She discussed it with the rest of the family who agreed, so Mrs F responded to the advertisement which accompanied the article.

Mrs B became aware of the need for black foster carers when she read an article in a magazine while on night duty at her local hospital. She was already considering this when she saw a programme on the same subject on television, which prompted her to make an application to the local authority. Mrs E was working as a social worker with children and families and her awareness of black children’s needs led her to become a foster carer.

The involvement of family members was not restricted to the decision to apply to foster. Mrs B’s son and husband became very involved, her son subsequently becoming a foster carer in his own right. Furthermore, as Mr and Mrs B became part of the Adult Living Scheme, some of their adult grandchildren joined in as carers under the Scheme. Mrs E’s son has also become a foster carer.

This account shows the importance of the wider black community, of which these families are part, as well as of other family members. Thus it is significant that Mr and Mrs D’s daughter was part of this network through her employment, and that they sought advice from another member of their black community. The community thus became a resource for the family. It also shows the strengths of the families in recruiting further resources, in the form of foster carers, from within their own ranks.

**Living with the children**

Since these families took children at such different ages and stages, the experiences of living with them varied considerably. Four different examples are described and discussed below. The experience of Mr and Mrs D is particularly revealing. They were in their mid-60s and late 50s respectively when they took Darren, who was six years old. He was of mixed racial parentage, with an African-Caribbean father and a white mother. They regarded him as their grandson and he referred to them as ‘Grandad’ and ‘Granny’. He was described to them as ‘difficult’ and appeared to be angry with the world at large. His previous foster carers were emigrating and did not wish to take him with them. Before that he had been in and out of care, and when he lived at home he remembered getting the blame for whatever went wrong. Mrs D described Darren as taking some time to settle and as redirecting his anger away from his previous foster carers towards them and towards his social worker. Despite this, he was welcomed into this large family; Mr and Mrs D had eight children, many of them with families of their own. He became particularly close to one granddaughter, who was close in age to him, and this seems to have been especially helpful.

Darren tested Mr and Mrs D so that
more than once they reached the point of asking for him to be moved. On each occasion they decided to carry on, neither being able to face the prospect of losing him and both wishing to ‘give him another chance’. Mrs D described two occasions when, after an argument with her, he tried to set fire to things in the house. Darren demonstrated his attachment to the family by adopting their surname as his own and using his own surname as a middle name.

Mrs D considered that a family holiday to America, where members of the wider family welcomed Darren warmly, was significant in helping him to feel accepted. A second trip to America was planned when Darren was a teenager, but his school expressed concern about the impact of the absence on his poor attitude to his studies and his progress. The family’s response was resourceful and imaginative. Mrs D contacted a black school teacher friend in New York, who agreed to supervise work set by Darren’s school in Britain. This proved successful and the teacher in New York helped Darren to modify some of his hostility towards school generally. Once again, this response shows the ability of this black family to mobilise resources through family and community networks, and in this instance across national boundaries. It is an example of the ‘diasporic’ complex of relationships, to which Alexander referred.

Several families described the experience of taking the children to the Caribbean, or to America, in order to meet members of the wider family, as important. One foster carer from the main study (Thoburn et al, in press) remarked:

*I think what clinched it was a trip to Jamaica to my family and she [the young person] then saw me not in isolation but as part of a family unit myself. It helped her to be accepted as part of a family unit.*

The significance of these visits will arise again when issues of racism and identity are discussed.

The importance of another member of the family, often a child of a similar age, was also emphasised by families. In Mrs D’s family it had been a grandchild. Mrs F had taken Amy, when she was 12 years old. In her family, the significant person for Amy was Mrs F’s oldest daughter, who was ten years older. Mrs F considers that the two of them served as mother figures to Amy. Rather like Darren, Amy began to use Mrs F’s surname but as a middle name. She also had no hesitation in calling Mrs F ‘Mum’.

Mrs E described a different experience. She took Frankie, a young man of African-Caribbean parentage, into her family when he was 16. He had come into residential care at the age of 11 when his mother died. He had been close to her and resisted earlier attempts at family placement out of a sense of loyalty. Consequently, the decision to move into Mrs E’s home was made by him with some trepidation. Mrs E’s professional training helped her to recognise that Frankie was still grieving for his mother. She herself had recently been widowed and so she could identify with his situation. She thought that they had been able to meet each other’s emotional needs and to work through the grieving process together. She quickly began to regard him as her ‘third child’ but accepted that he could not call her ‘Mum’ or introduce her as ‘my Mum’ for quite some time. Eventually he was able to do so and is now very relaxed about calling her ‘Mum’ and regarding her as his children’s grandmother. Clearly, Mrs E demonstrated a lot of skill and sensitivity in understanding and meeting Frankie’s needs.

Mrs C took two girls from residential care, both of whom were 14 years old at the time of placement. The first to arrive was Verna, while Sandra came about a year later. Mrs C considered that Verna had lacked a consistent mother figure which she herself sought to provide. She noted that Verna’s relationship with her father was poor and this became significant when Mrs C’s own relationship with her partner became difficult. Verna always sided with Mrs C and became very angry with the partner, thereby mirroring her own anger towards her father. When Mrs C met Mr C and they decided to get married, Verna tested out Mr C with her
behaviour. Although Mrs C felt that she has had to work hard with Verna, she considers this has been worthwhile. Relations with Sandra have not been so demanding, since she was able to respond more easily to Mrs C’s physical affection and to the stability offered by the placement. In Mrs C’s opinion, her relationship with her adult daughters has been important for Verna and Sandra. They have learned that people can disagree and still remain friends. Indeed, after heated exchanges on one occasion, Verna observed that ‘argument is good for the soul’! It is clear that Mrs C’s family has provided Verna and Sandra with a sense of security through sustained effort.

These four examples show the different challenges that black families have faced in living with and relating to children with substantial needs. They also show that the families have demonstrated considerable skills and resourcefulness in meeting them.

Dealing with issues of racism and identity
Five of the eight children placed with these families were described as being uncomfortable with their black identity to a considerable degree. All five had been in residential care, three of them in all-white environments with little or no contact with black people. According to their foster carers, they had internalised negative images about black people and either sought to deny that they were black or else made derogatory comments about their heritage. The work undertaken by the foster carers in these circumstances was most impressive.

Joseph and Joanne
Perhaps the most overt and extreme example of denying black identity came from Joseph who was placed with Mrs A with his sister Joanne, when they were 15 and 12 years old. Both their parents were African-Caribbean. The children had been placed in a residential unit in a shire county far from their home and they came to Mrs A after an attempted rehabilitation to their father and his new partner broke down after a very short time. Joseph insisted that that he was not black, but a ‘light-skinned darkie’. Mrs A was shocked to find him referring to black people as ‘Bourneville selection’ and making jokes like ‘If I didn’t see a black man grin and so didn’t see his teeth, I wouldn’t be able to see him.’ His sister was less overt in her statements, but Mrs A felt that she too was ‘acting out not being black’. Mrs A attributed this language and attitude to several factors: the racism, which the children had internalised in the residential unit and in the all-white school they had attended; their father’s pride in being light-skinned himself; and his opposition to the children being placed in a black family.

Mrs A had always thought of racism as being external to children, rather than internalised by them. Initially she felt de-skilled, since nothing in her foster care training had prepared her for this situation. However, she was determined to deal with it, by enlisting the help of her children and by enrolling the children in a local school, which had a racially diverse population. She also had the support of the black social worker responsible for the children, who recognised the importance of the children sorting out their racial and ethnic identities. In her opinion, however, the crucial event for Joseph and Joanne occurred when, owing to the illness of Mrs A’s mother, the entire family visited Jamaica. The experience of meeting the extended family, who welcomed Joseph and Joanne very readily, and of living in a black society was very helpful to both children. It was particularly important for Joseph who, for the first time, saw black people as positive role models and in positions of authority. After Joseph had left the household, Mrs A received an invitation to his wedding where she met his father. She noted that Joseph was marrying another ‘light-skinned darkie’, which makes her wonder how far he has sorted out his confusion over his racial identity.

Joanne appears to have had less difficulty accepting her blackness. She was initially close to Mrs A’s younger daughter and derived much from that relationship. Although the placement ran into difficulties during Joanne’s teens and
ended after three-and-a-half years, it is striking that Joanne moved on to another black foster family, whose daughter was already a friend, and remained there until she was 18. This suggests that the work undertaken by Mrs A and her family on issues of race eventually bore fruit.

Amy
Amy was 12 years old when she joined Mrs F’s family. A child of African parents, she had a history of being in care from an early age and all her carers had been white. Before coming to Mrs F, Amy had been living in a children’s home in a predominantly white area where she had little contact with black people. According to Mrs F, she found it hard initially to relate to them and had some difficulties at school with her black peers. When she heard about this Mrs F intervened and with the help of the school staff the situation was resolved. Amy derived much support from the two daughters of Mrs F’s sister, who were close to her in age and spent an extended period in the household. The experience of living in the household, and a trip to the Caribbean to meet the extended family, helped Amy to feel at ease with her own identity.

Verna and Sandra
Mrs C described how on arrival both Verna and Sandra were self-deprecating about their racial origins and their identity. Both girls had long histories of living in residential care and both were of mixed racial parentage, with African-Caribbean fathers. Verna’s mother was of mixed racial parentage while Sandra’s mother was white. Although Verna’s children’s home had undertaken a lot of work on issues of race and identity, and had worked hard on building up children’s self-esteem, Mrs C found that Verna used derogatory terms about herself, like ‘half-caste’. Mrs C tackled this by getting Verna to look up the word ‘caste’ in the dictionary, discuss its meaning and thus recognise the absurdity of the term ‘half-caste’. After this episode, Verna stopped using this derogatory language and began to refer to herself as being ‘of mixed race’. Much later, when she had enlisted Mrs C’s help in trying to contact her mother, Verna confided that her mother held strong racist attitudes which had not helped her to sort out her views about herself.

According to Mrs C, Sandra held similar views about her own ethnicity and racial identity. A major step in helping her to achieve a more positive view of herself occurred when she decided to trace her father, with help and encouragement from Mrs C and from Sandra’s social worker. This was achieved and contact, although never entirely easy, continued until her father’s death. Sandra has remained in touch with other members of his family, including her paternal grandmother and various uncles and aunts.

These brief descriptions of the work undertaken by the foster carers highlight their very considerable commitment and skills in helping the children to undo the damage to their sense of identity and ethnicity. It is clear that the foster carers themselves were secure in their own identities and took pride in their black heritage. It is also clear that they drew upon members of their own immediate and extended families to help the children in their care. The final example shows how they were also prepared to draw upon members of the children’s own families. This is further explored in the following section.

Contact with the children’s families
A major strength of the foster families described here was their ability and readiness to help the children retain, and in some instances regain, contact with members of their birth families. In Delroy’s case this did not happen, and that was due to the fact that all contact with his parents and any other members of his family had been lost many years before he joined Mrs B’s family. Mrs A found it difficult to have direct contact with Joseph’s and Joanne’s father, because of his opposition to their placement in a black family. However, Joseph kept in touch with him and she did meet him at Joseph’s wedding.

All the other foster carers tried to keep the family links alive. To her regret, Mrs F found that Amy was reluctant to keep in
touch with her father. He had retained contact with her while she was in residential care and wanted this to continue. He died when Amy was 15 and still living with Mrs F. Later Mrs F found that Amy had kept a letter from him as something important for her.

Mrs C’s involvement in helping Sandra to re-establish contact with her father and other paternal relatives has already been noted. This has meant that Sandra continues to have a black family of her own, even after her father’s death. Sandra’s sisters had been in residential care with her and their mother used to visit them regularly. With Mrs C’s encouragement, Sandra continued to see her mother and sisters throughout the placement. Mrs C also helped Verna to resume contact with various siblings with whom she had lost touch, and this proved very important for her. Attempts to establish a meeting with her mother were not successful. One was arranged with Mrs C’s help, but in the event neither Verna or her mother was able to face it and both withdrew.

Darren retained contact with his father when he joined Mr and Mrs D’s family. In time Darren’s father became part of their extended family. He would call in and ask their advice about financial matters and they regarded him as another son of the household. When he decided to remarry, they were invited to the wedding. Interestingly, Darren refused to be an usher at the ceremony and at the reception afterwards preferred to join Mr and Mrs D’s table rather than sit with his father. However, the continued contact with his father was important for Darren. Contact with his mother was not successful. She arranged to visit but did not do so and Darren felt this deeply.

When Frankie joined Mrs E’s family his brother remained in residential care. Contact was maintained and Frankie’s brother always joined them over Christmas. Mrs E also ensured that the brothers kept in touch with a family friend, a white neighbour of their mother’s who had been significant for them.

It is very evident that the foster families recognised the importance of the children’s contacts with birth relatives and felt secure enough to encourage them. Their view of fostering resembled Holman’s (1980) inclusive model, which accords well with Alexander’s view of the black family, as flexible and resilient enough to include ‘fictive kin’, such as Darren’s father or Frankie’s brother. This appears to have served the children and young people, and indeed their birth relatives, well.

Support networks
The families all derived considerable support from their own members and networks, both in England and abroad. Evidence for this has been supplied throughout. They also drew heavily on their church networks. All six families regarded their religious beliefs and church membership as important to them. Two of the foster carers described themselves as Roman Catholics, one as Anglican, one as Baptist, one as formerly Methodist but now Seventh Day Adventist, and one as belonging to a black church. For nearly all of them the church community to which they belonged was a significant source of support – far more highly regarded than the fostering support groups organised by the local authority.

The families’ evaluation of their efforts
It will come as no surprise that not all of these placements were fully successful in providing the children with permanent substitute family care. It has already been noted that Joanne, for example, left Mrs A’s family in her mid-teens and moved on to another black foster family. Amy left Mrs F’s family at 18 in less than happy circumstances, which Mrs F attributes to her ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’ at the local further education college. However, Amy has resumed contact after a difficult period in her late teens and continues to be part of the family, so that her daughter is regarded as Mrs F’s grand-daughter. In marked contrast, Joanne has had no further contact with Mrs A who does regret the apparently irreparable breakdown in their relationship. However, she considers that she and her daughters provided Joanne with
strong role models which have served her well.

Joseph keeps in touch with Mrs A who describes him as 'a chicken [who] will always come home to roost'. She feels proud of what she achieved with him and reports that since leaving he has told her, regarding their uneasy relationship, ‘It wasn’t you, it was my situation.’

Both Mrs B and Mrs E consider that they have achieved what they hoped with Delroy and Frankie respectively. Delroy remains placed with Mrs B through the Adult Living Scheme and she regards him as ‘a blessing’. When she is no longer able to care for him through age or infirmity, one of her sons, who is also involved in the Scheme, will take over responsibility. There is no doubt that Delroy has found a family for life. Mrs E is immensely proud of Frankie’s achievements in his own particular field and of his happy family life with his partner and children. She feels totally accepted by him and his family.

Mrs D continues to feel committed to Darren who lives independently but visits her regularly. He comes for meals with her and she looks after his clothes and his washing. She encourages his father to persevere with Darren, although the relationship is uneasy. She feels proud of having given Darren love and stability and of having done a good job as a foster carer. Darren is very much part of her family and will probably remain so.

Mrs C is proud of the fact that Verna and Sandra are living independently and managing their lives. Although both of them refer to her as ‘Aunty’ rather than ‘Mum’, they behave in all other respects as daughters of the family. They spend Christmas with her, and if she is ever unwell they will return to the household to look after her and to take charge generally. They too appear to have acquired a family for life.

Conclusion
It is clear that the six families described have shown very considerable strengths in providing care for black children with a wide range of needs and have met with a high degree of success. Their accounts are important because they provide examples of good practice, resourcefulness, skill and determination, and they thereby give the lie to any claims that black families and black communities are unable to provide appropriate placements for black children.

References


