Parent mentoring schemes have been found to be successful in providing peer support for families with young children in times of need. Parent mentors can often be a more acceptable form of help to fellow parents than professionals. In response to a request from local adoptive parents and following the establishment of a parenting skills training programme for all its adopters, Oxfordshire County Council, in partnership with Parentline Plus, have pioneered a parent mentoring scheme that has been tailor-made for adopters and uses trained adoptive parents as ‘buddies’ to newer adopters. **Liz Gilkes** and **Louise Capstick** report on how the scheme was set up and run as a partnership between an adoption agency and a local service provider. The buddy scheme was evaluated by means of a questionnaire and was found to be effective in providing the type of support requested by new adopters. It has now become an established part of the county’s adoption support services and is highly valued by those who use it.

### Introduction

I wanted an opportunity to discuss problems unique to our family circumstances with someone who understood why and how our children were different. (Adopter)

In 2005, Oxfordshire County Council’s Family Placement Service embarked on a new and innovative buddy scheme for adopters, in partnership with a charitable service provider, in a bid to provide good-quality, tailor-made, cost-effective support.

In 2001, following consultation with local adopters, the Council had commissioned The Family Nurturing Network, an agency now merged with the charity Parentline Plus, to develop and deliver a ten-week parenting course designed for adoptive parents (see Gilkes and Klimes, 2003). The original course was based on the widely used Incredible Years Training Programme (Webster-Stratton, 1992). The present course has expanded on this and now incorporates additional material developed by Parentline Plus. It gives adopters the opportunity to explore and learn about positive parenting strategies, as well as to share thoughts and experiences about being an adoptive parent. These strategies seek to help adopters to cope with the task of re-parenting the often traumatised children from the care system who now comprise the majority of children being placed for adoption. The initial feedback from participants was highly encouraging as adopters valued the skills and support gained from the course, as well as the opportunity to talk to other adopters. This work led to the establishment of the buddy scheme four years later.

Oxfordshire County Council has always been keen to encourage and enable consultations with adopters to identify the types of support that would be most useful, and it was at the county’s Adoption Forum that the idea of a local buddy scheme was conceived. Adopters hoped that a parent-to-parent mentoring scheme that supported them through the initial stages of the adoption process would help to alleviate common feelings of isolation and stress. It was agreed that the scheme would be a useful addition to the range of support services available to adopters and their families in the county.

### The training course for buddies

The Oxfordshire buddy scheme, which is now in its third year, includes a training course for volunteer befrienders and up to 12 sessions of individual support for adoptive parents, combined with support and supervision from Parentline Plus. The charity was able to adapt its existing community befriending scheme model to meet the specific needs of adoptive parents.

The first training ran in early 2005, with the first set of buddies matched...
with new adopters later that year. The course consisted of eight training sessions, plus supervision and support sessions. It is accredited with the Open College Network which offers further incentives for those interested in becoming a buddy.

**Course content**
The training course content was designed to give adopter buddies the skills and experience to befriend another adoptive parent. Overall, the emphasis is on supporting another parent through listening, rather than ‘fixing’ or advising. What adopters often lack is someone to listen to them and give them time over a period of weeks rather than one-off answers and advice. The course content includes:

- setting the scene;
- building relationships;
- attitudes, values and prejudices;
- confidentiality and respect;
- protecting ourselves;
- pulling it all together;
- support and supervision sessions.

**Course participants**
Nine adopters were recruited onto the initial buddy scheme training. The group comprised eight women and one man. Most of the trainee buddies had attended the ten-week parenting course for adopters and the majority had children placed with them for at least two years. Evaluation of the scheme was seen as a key learning process and the training was perceived as extremely positive. All trainees felt that it met their expectations and that they had gained from the experience:

*I know now that I don’t have to know all the answers to be a buddy.* (Buddy)

**Supervision**
Supervision and support of buddies are offered by telephone, email and in groups. Group supervision sessions take place every four to six weeks and give buddies an opportunity to share their experiences in a confidential, supportive environment. They have an opportunity to discuss any difficulties, ask for more information and receive training updates.

**Referral process and matching**
A leaflet was designed to publicise the service, stressing the confidential and flexible nature of the scheme. It explains the referral routes and how parent-to-parent support provides a way to talk to someone who really understands the issues adopters are facing.

The next stage of the process is to look at the referral process and ensure that adopters and buddies are successfully matched. Referrals are invited via two routes: self-referral or referral from the social worker linked to the family. Increasingly, referrals come from adopters themselves, especially as information about the buddy scheme is given to all adopters via the adoption preparation groups in the county.

The adopter is contacted for an informal assessment to talk through the processes and iron out any anxieties about the service. Also at this stage, the adopter can request any preferences for matching, eg someone in a similar area or someone with similar aged children at the time of adoption. This phone call is a key ingredient in building the relationship and trust with the adopter.

**Communication**
Buddies use a mix of home visits, visits to other venues, such as parks, farms and children’s centres, and telephone calls at an agreed time. The length of time an adopter can continue to have contact with a buddy varies, depending on need, but it ranges from three to over 12 visits, with a period of 12 weeks being the average. Some adopters and buddies meet weekly, while others get together every two to four weeks, again depending on circumstances and need. It is considered important to meet up in person initially, but later in the buddy relationship, some pairs speak on the
telephone at an agreed time to discuss current issues.

**Evaluation of the pilot buddy scheme**

The evaluation revealed patterns and themes that provided an excellent platform from which to develop the scheme for the benefit of future participants.

The most common theme to emerge was that adopters wanted and expected to be listened to in a confidential setting by someone who understood their situation. As one adopter said, ‘I wanted a listening ear.’ It also became transparent that the independent nature of the service enabled the adopter to feel supported by both the adoption agency and a more informal support structure that was separate from family and friends:

*I liked having someone to turn to, who was not part of social services.*

(Adopter)

*When the going was tough and we had exhausted our own network, the buddy service was great in that they put a different slant on the situation.* (Adopter)

Adopters reported that they found the support of a buddy to be helpful in supporting them through their particular situation, and the fact that buddies had been through the process and understood many of their experiences made a big difference:

*I was helpful talking to someone who understands all the little things.* (Adopter)

*Friends who have their own children sometimes dismiss things or misunderstand. Someone in the same situation just knows why some things happen.* (Adopter)

Feedback from buddies and adopters has revealed that the following topics were frequently covered in the support sessions:

- behaviour management/aggressive and challenging behaviour;
- attachment;
- legal/social services procedures;
- difficulties at school/non-attendance at school;
- difficulties at home and school due to previous abuse or neglect;
- how to be an advocate/get the best for a child;
- contact with birth parents.

**Future training**

To fulfil the demand for buddies in Oxfordshire, a second course to train a new set of buddies took place in autumn 2007. This training took into account the evaluation of the first course. For instance, one adopter said she would appreciate ‘an offer of a buddy or an email buddy at key times, such as when children start school or for particular issues such as behaviour management’. In addition, it is envisaged that fathers might find it easier to access the help of the buddy scheme if email support were available. Buddies now receive guidance on how to make effective use of telephone and email as a form of support, to be used alongside face-to-face contact.

Oxfordshire has commissioned further courses from Parentline Plus, Oxford. A ten-week Parents of Adopted Teenagers course and a series of ‘reflection’ workshops (exploring issues of loss and bereavement) are planned in 2008 and 2009. These sit alongside the existing ten-week parenting courses and buddy scheme, to provide a range of integrated support services for adopters in Oxfordshire.

The county believes that the buddy scheme provides an effective and well-trained team of parent mentors, fulfilling the commitment to support local adopters, in line with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It is hoped that the scheme will help build stability for adoptive families and, in the long run, reduce the number of adoption disruptions.
References

Note
The website address for Parentline Plus is www.parentlineplus.org.uk
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