Adopters’ experiences of preparation to parent children with serious difficulties

A selected group of adopters coping with very troubled children recently placed from care was asked about their satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the preparation for parenting that had been provided. Although some aspects were well received, most thought that the preparation had not been helpful in developing the parenting skills for managing difficult behaviour. It was notable that the child’s level of disturbance still came as a surprise to many. The study, reported here by Alan Rushton and Elizabeth Monck, throws up the question of how to deliver a service that meets the need for both general preparation to adopt and preparation to parent the specific child eventually placed. Fresh consideration needs to be given to the best means, and timing, of parenting preparation and support.

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Introduction
As more has been learned about the short-term problems of children late placed from care, and the persistence of some difficulties long after placement (Rushton and Dance, 2006), it is clearly sensible, not to say essential, that all adopters receive appropriate preparation. Guidance about preparation, as set out in the Adoption Agencies Regulations (2005), is mostly concerned with information-providing about the nature of the adoption process and the legal procedures, and only brief mention is made of the skills necessary to be an adoptive parent (para 24, 2(d)). The details are left to the discretion of the agencies and, not surprisingly, they deliver a different balance of advice, information, training and psychological exploration.

Comprehensive preparation for adoptive parenting can cover numerous interlinked aims and activities. It may include, for example, giving information about the adoption process, legal responsibilities, financial help about support services; advising on developmental issues and the common problems of children who have been in care; presenting the characteristics and unique histories of individual children; and exploring adopters’ expectations. We concentrate here on preparation for the task of parenting those children adopted late from care who present challenging behavioural, emotional and social problems.

A number of practice manuals are being developed with the aim of creating a common curriculum to assist applicants in considering the implications of adoption. For example, BAAF has published an eight-session group-based manual (Beesley et al, 2006). However, it will take time before we know how widely these manuals are being used and whether they are achieving the aim of adequately preparing adopters.

In terms of systematic research, only a handful of studies exist that specifically concern preparation for adopters of children placed from care in middle childhood. Little is known about the typical content, methods and quality of the preparation and training on offer in the UK. Most of the research is descriptive rather than evaluative and many questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the relevance of the preparation and training to the needs of the adopters in relation to the specific child arriving in their home from care? Is the timing of the preparation well judged? Are the time and cost devoted to preparation justified in terms of outcomes, both short and long term?

In the study of middle childhood, UK adoptions from care placed a decade ago (Quinton et al, 1998), investigation of the adopters’ experience of preparation showed that, although they expressed general satisfaction with the preparation, by no means all were positive and most expressed criticisms with some aspect. Many adopters found the training too global and with too little input on the specific skills that they
would eventually need to parent their child. Lowe et al (1999) examined support for the adoption of older children and found that agencies varied considerably in the way they prepared adopters. Some adopters in their study found the social workers extremely helpful, but others thought the agencies failed to recognise their previous parenting experiences. Some complained of selective imparting of information about the child to be placed. In this study the researchers found a lack of information about practical parenting strategies. They recommended greater tailoring of the preparation to individual needs and less use of fixed practices. As adopters have a range of characteristics (single or a couple, ethnicity, sexuality, class, education) and have different understandings and expectations of adoption, the preparation process should acknowledge this.

One study on preparation for being the parent of a child in care is of interest in its use of a comparative design. Puddy and Jackson (2003) measured the effects of a parenting training programme for potential foster carers aimed at teaching them to manage undesirable behaviour and build the children’s life skills compared with a ‘no training’ control group. The results were disappointing in that the experimental group improved on only a small minority of the goals of the intervention. The researchers concluded that the programme improved knowledge of the behavioural approach, but improved parenting techniques very little.

Two US-based studies have investigated the consequences of ‘preparation’. Sar (2000), in a survey of preparation for adopting special needs children from care, mailed questionnaires to adoptive mothers on average six years after the adoptive placement, inviting their recall of preparation, and attempted to relate this to features of the subsequent placement. The mothers found training to be an adoptive parent the most useful preparation task, but learning about adoption and adoption procedures proved not to be related to outcome. However, the low response rate (30%) suggests a highly selected group of parents whose experiences may not reflect adoptions where preparation had led to better outcomes or where preparation more usefully matched the parents’ needs.

In a study by Wind et al (2006) of adoption preparation in relation to special needs children, parents were asked about 18 different kinds of information that might have been provided before the placement. The greater the amount of either general adoption information or biological/medical information about the child the parents received, the better prepared they felt. Where children had a history of pre-placement adversities, the adoptive families were more likely to receive preparation services focusing on the child’s past experiences and caretaking history. We do not learn, however, how effective these services were.

In summary, many of these studies have concluded that the preparation activities offered can be very variable but adopters have found that information could have been better tailored to the unique circumstances of the placed child and the characteristics of the adoptive family. The studies cited show the difficulties in tracing clear causal links between variations in the type and content of ‘adoption preparation services’ and subsequent developments in the placement. They were mostly based on placements made in the 1990s and it is important to know whether shortcomings identified then have persisted.

Sample and method
This investigation of current practice in ‘preparation’ formed one element of a larger study evaluating the effects of parenting advice programmes post placement. The results of this study, showing the effects on the adopters’ parenting and on their children’s behaviour, will not be reported here but are published elsewhere (Rushton and Monck, 2009). In the main study, children with histories of abuse and neglect recently placed for non-relative adoption (aged between 3 and 8) by English local
authorities were screened for serious difficulties as measured on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997). Of the 178 families approached to see if they would complete a questionnaire, just under half of the children (n = 80, 45%) scored over the cut-off for serious difficulties and 38 adopters agreed to participate in the main study. Information on ‘preparation’ was taken from the initial face-to-face interviews conducted with this selected sample of adoptive parents taking very difficult children into their homes.

Interviews with adopters
Information was gathered from the adopters in the first of the home-based research interviews, once they had consented to being in the trial but before random allocation to the parenting programmes. We wanted to build a picture of the pre-placement preparation offered to these adopters and then ask them to reflect on the services they had received in the light of their experiences once the child had been placed. We were particularly concerned with the salience of the preparation for the individual child and not simply the generalised satisfaction with it.

We began by asking what expectations they had had about becoming an adoptive parent. Some recalled that they had anticipated difficulties, but had thought they were up to the challenge:

I expected hard work and a complete life change, with limitations on our freedom to do as we want.

We knew it would be difficult and that the children would need a clear structure, but we were not prepared for quite how difficult it would turn out to be.

They also recalled thinking that they had received all the information they needed, and admitted to feeling well prepared at the time, so it was particularly striking that they still found the child’s arrival a shock. Many were taken aback at the contrast between the problems they had been warned about and the reality when the child was placed:

I thought it would be a lot rosier than it was. I thought it would be easy, and we would skip off into the distance together. It’s not how I thought it would be.

This latter view suggests that this adoptive parent was unusually optimistic and poorly informed, and that the preparation course was not providing firm enough information about the strong likelihood that children coming from care would have serious and possibly continuing difficulties.

The content and quality of the preparation to adopt
The adopters were asked what type of preparation they had been offered by the placing agency. The common pattern was for initial group sessions with other potential adopters with a social work leader, followed later at the linking and matching stage by individual social work visits to the home focusing more on an individual child or children. On average, three group sessions were offered, varying between one and five and usually lasting several hours. Written preparation materials were generally provided but a few (13%) said these had not been offered. Just over half (53%) were shown videos designed to help them to think about what would be involved in adopting from care, and experienced adopters had contributed to nearly all (87%) of the training sessions. Adopters received, on average, four social worker home visits. However, as the visits often had several functions, it was not possible to say what proportion was devoted specifically to preparation for adoptive parenting. Frequently, the assessment and approval process would be running alongside or thought of as part of the preparation.

1 In the presentation of findings, all proportions are given as a percentage of n = 38 unless otherwise stated because 38 families were interviewed initially. Some questions did not apply to those without partners or without other resident family members.
Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the preparation process
We were interested in whether any aspects of the agency activity, from initial contact through to group meetings, linking and matching and introductions to the child and social worker visits, had proved helpful in the light of their subsequent experience as adopters. When asked if the specific parenting preparation elements of the process had suited them, 50 per cent were satisfied that it had, 42 per cent said it had suited some of their needs, but eight per cent had not been at all satisfied. Most parents (90%) said the preparation had helped them understand the likely problems of looked after children, but 65 per cent thought the courses had not been especially helpful in developing the parenting skills they would need for a child coming to them from foster care.

The satisfied adopters
The satisfied adoptive parents found the training well done and useful to them, particularly discussion of the difficulties in the child's behaviour that might confront them. One family found the social worker's home visits to be the most useful and described her as 'brilliant' and 'very supportive':

The more experienced social workers explained the psychology and potential difficulties and were good and useful. We met the child's foster carers three times and that was the most useful thing.

We were very impressed with the course and the ten-day lead-in to meeting our child. The course was 'real' and dealt with possible issues. They 'laid it out straight', nothing was held back.

The training definitely suited our needs. Looking at the child's needs from different angles: being asked to say what would you do if...? We were encouraged to think about the importance of food, bed, warm clothes – all things to make you feel secure.

For this family, the training seemed to expand their horizons and promoted fresh reflection:

We came up against things we hadn't even thought about, that is, the children come with baggage and you need to think about it. One session explained issues to do with different sorts of abuse – this was an eye opener. This made us think in a different way.

Other adopters emphasised help in understanding the child's past:

The course helped us to understand the problems and highlighted the issues around understanding the context of the birth family.

The most useful bit was discussion of the consequences of abuse and how emotional abuse leaves the most permanent damage.

The dissatisfied adopters
Among the group dissatisfied with the provision of parenting skills (65%), a commonly expressed view was that the impressions they formed from attending training could be very different from the reality once the child was placed. The following quotations illustrate the point:

The talks didn’t seem real without knowing the children. Hypothetical situations aren’t useful to new parents to learn to deal with future problems. It would have been better to do that on the home visits, as then we would have been able to talk specifically about the children. A lot of issues are more significant afterwards when confronted by the real thing.

Preparation was helpful on one level, but nothing can prepare you for the emotional drain nor how hard it is. We cried together at the end of some days. You don't know the full impact until it happens.

As general training it was fine, but we
wish we had trained for the specific needs of the children. They told us about abuse, but not about how children react to abuse. Nothing can prepare you for the real thing.

In what other ways was the preparation not suitable?
Mixed views were expressed on the benefits of meeting other families who had adopted as it did not, of itself, always guarantee enlightenment. One couple felt the adopters had nothing special to add:

The other adoptive parents didn’t say anything useful except how lovely it was and gave us no idea of how to cope.

Some wanted better information on how long the difficult behaviour was likely to last and what other problems might emerge, as the following quotations describe:

We weren’t warned that it would take him three months to settle in, and us not to feel like babysitters but start to feel like a family.

It didn’t suit us as it offered little on the practical side of being an adoptive parent. Too much time was spent on detailed discussions about disability, race and so on and not enough on behaviour management. No advice was given on the possible effects on other children in the family, and how to deal with the new sibling relationship.

Classes were useful in talking about what to expect, but didn’t really prepare us for how to cope with the behaviour. We were helped to see what the problems might be but not really how to deal with them. Social workers have not really lived with it so don’t know how to deal with it.

These comments suggest that in order to manage the more severe problems, a skills-based approach is needed that goes beyond describing potential difficulties to recommending sound parenting strategies.

Matching the type of preparation to the adopters’ needs
One of the themes that emerged was that the preparation may have been good in its own right, but did not meet the needs of particular adopters and particular children. Several adopters who already had parenting experience were frustrated by what was offered. One couple said:

It was not suitable as we were the only ones who had other children; the course was biased in favour of people without kids.

This couple’s concerns were different and they wanted to know how the attachment process might compare with their birth children and wanted more on the impact of the new arrivals on their resident children.

Another family said:

We had to attend a course for young children because we wanted an under-five-year-old, but there was too much nappy changing and bottle mixing and first aid for tiny children.

One couple, who had adopted previously, were not invited to the preparation classes provided by their local authority and regretted this, saying that their need was for ‘a more meaty, in-depth, concentrated course’.

We asked all the parents what else they would have liked to be told about: 40 per cent mentioned more on child development issues, especially what to expect of the children who would be placed with them. More than half wished they had been told more about how to deal with aggressive behaviour and more than half wanted more information on attachment problems, while one-third wanted information about handling their child’s peer relationships.

Understanding adoption and managing problems
We asked the adopters to look back and say whether the classes and social work...
visits had been useful in thinking about being the parent of the child subsequently placed with them. There was a spread of opinion, but the adopters largely responded positively: 26 per cent said they found them very useful, 42 per cent useful, 26 per cent mixed and six per cent not useful.

We then asked whether the preparation had helped the adopters to understand the kinds of problems children placed from care might have. A third (33%) said very fully, two-thirds (62%) said well enough and only five per cent said their understanding had not been helped at all. However, in relation to the more specific question as to whether any of the classes or social worker visits offered help with managing difficult behaviour, only 16 per cent said they had been helpful, 35 per cent said not very helpful, 30 per cent said not at all helpful and the remainder (19%) could not remember. It was surprising that so few said that they had been helped with this central task. To quote one dissatisfied couple:

_We didn’t feel that the course covered possible problem areas and was more concerned with getting us approved as adopters. There was a suggestion that behaviour problems may be an issue – but nothing in particular was mentioned. We drew on our ‘common sense’ to realise there would be problems._

### Table 1
**Important issues covered in preparation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>% of adopters rating these as the important issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problems of ex-care children</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of help for adoptive parents</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal information</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting skills</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial information</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on own children*</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Of those who had their own children still resident in the family, a third thought it was important to cover the effect of the placed child on the family in preparation.

### Table 2
**Topics thought to be missing or inadequately covered in the preparation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>% of adopters thinking this item poorly covered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger/aggression</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with adopters (attachment issues)</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child development issues</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with peers</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn behaviour</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity issues</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with birth family</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We asked the adopters to think about which issues covered in pre-placement preparation had seemed important for them. They were given a list and asked to tick as many topics as applied. Table 1 summarises the frequency with which the topics were chosen, in descending order from the most important.

The adopters were then asked to report any topics they would have liked to have been told about or which could have been better addressed in the preparation. Table 2 shows, in descending order, beginning with the most frequently named, the issues the adopters would have liked better covered in the preparation process. Strategies for dealing with aggression and attachment difficulties were the most commonly requested topics. One couple added:

_We would have liked to have been told more about how to deal with anger, about bereavement and the child’s fear of people close to him dying._

Only a few listed the issue of contact with the birth family, but this may not have had a great impact by the time we saw the families in the first year, or perhaps little birth family contact was planned in these cases.

We were interested in the adopters’ reactions to the child’s arrival in the first
one or two weeks. Table 3 shows the range of responses of the main carers and their partner and other family members.

Although the first reaction was wholly positive for some respondents (37%) and their partners (51% – when there was one), it was clearly not unalloyed pleasure for the remainder. Half reported a mixed reaction and a few had a wholly negative response. This may be expected from the sheer novelty of the situation for both the parents and the newly arrived children.

Adopters’ expectations and reactions to the children’s arrival

On the assumption that the preparation process could have helped prospective adopters to modify their expectations in the light of other adopters’ experiences of taking on children from care, we asked how the experience of the early days of placement matched up with what they had been expecting.

It was fairly surprising to discover that, even after agency preparation, 24 per cent of the main carers and 16 per cent of their partners said the reality of the presence of the child in their home was a totally unexpected experience (Table 4):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% responses</th>
<th>Wholly positive</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Wholly negative</th>
<th>Can’t remember or not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self (n = 38)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner (n = 31)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopter’s view of child’s reaction</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other resident family member (n = 15)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Reactions to the arrival of the child

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Totally unexpected (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self (n = 37)</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner (n = 31)</td>
<td>16</td>
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</table>

for two years. We [had been] under the impression that the children were ‘ready to move’, so we were very shocked. We were particularly shocked by the children’s anger; we could have coped with sadness but found it very hard to deal with anger.

She was very distressed and volatile; testing the boundaries about our routines. Very tiring [and] I was exhausted.

The first few days were ‘wild’! He wouldn’t settle: no smile; no laughter; no concept of playing. He followed me [mother] everywhere. Very aggressive. We hadn’t expected him to be so wild. I suppose I was shocked.

One couple summed it up as:

Our child was not as we expected, for example, his aggressiveness and how to cope with it – so we weren’t well prepared for him.

Feelings of exhaustion were very common (Table 5). Few were disappointed, but a substantial minority reported feelings of inadequacy. It was perhaps less surprising that the main carer was more likely to feel exhausted and inadequate than the partner (where one existed), although most partners had
taken at least a week off work to help settle the children in.

Only half felt pleased and in control, with the partners having very similar reactions (Table 6). However, parents not infrequently used the term ‘honeymoon’ to describe the first days in the household, after which problems would emerge:

A honeymoon period and an absolute angel. He couldn’t wait to stay here. We were all very happy and felt on top of things.

Honeymoon for two weeks, then her first tantrum in Tesco. There were ‘mixed’ reactions from relatives but I felt wholly positive myself.

The first few days were wholly positive for us and for her. She was chatty and amiable, responsive, pleasant, a fussy eater but no bedtime problems. There was a honeymoon period before everything went wrong.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This study of the preparation stage has the advantage of being based on a defined group of adopters and their recently placed children rather than a heterogeneous sample of adoptive families. All the children had been identified either by their adoptive parents and/or by their social worker as showing significant problems on the SDQ within 18 months of their placement. Furthermore, this was an interview-based study and not a mailed questionnaire, which often has a poor response rate. These were, therefore, the views of what preparation was like for a group of adopters known to have had children placed with them in middle childhood with a high level of current difficulties. Experiences of the children and of preparation might be different with children of different ages or with less severe problems than those in this sample. It would be helpful if agencies could identify children with high difficulties and their profile of problems more systematically and then the preparation could be devised accordingly.

We examined the satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the pre-placement process, both introductory sessions as well as individual meetings, with a special focus on whether it had proved useful for taking on an individual child. Most of the adopters thought the preparation was generally relevant and that it had helped them to reflect and to improve their understanding at the time, but few of these adopters believed the sessions had prepared them for the parenting challenge that their child presented or had trained them in the necessary skills and strategies to manage the behavioural difficulties. This is a reminder that any feedback taken at the end of preparation sessions may well be positive, but a more telling picture emerges when initial benefits of the preparation are compared with adopters’ experiences and reflections after the child has been placed with them.

The responses of these adopters can be compared with information collected for the Maudsley Adoption and Foster- ing study a decade ago (Quinton et al., 1998). Adopters in that study found the training too global, with too little emphasis on parenting skills. The current findings were similar, in that experienced parents were the most dissatisfied and insufficient attention was paid to the impact on the families’ own children.

Some UK agencies are encouraging more active learning from personal contact with recently formed adoptive

<table>
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<th>Table 5</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Negative reactions to the child’s arrival</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self (n = 37)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner (n = 31)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Table 6</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive reactions to the child’s arrival</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Self (n = 38)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner (n = 31)</td>
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families with whom the applicants have been matched and applicants are encouraged to learn about the real-life experience of the challenges children from care might present by links to Family Centres.

The main question thrown up by this study appears to be how to deliver a service which meets the need both for general preparation and for preparation to parent the child eventually placed. Only so much can be achieved by the introductory group model, and providing the skills to handle the likely difficulties of a particular child has clearly proved hard to achieve in advance of the placement.

In order to respond to the needs of the adopters who did not feel adequately prepared, a number of options are worth considering for developing a better service. First, adoption social workers could have more training to build their confidence in preparing adopters to deal with specific problems; the two which stand out from the current study are the child’s challenging behaviour, especially anger, aggression and defiance (present in all 38 families), and distorted attachment behaviour (present in two-thirds of the children). Second, greater use could be made of behaviour management specialists to advise social workers and adopters in selected cases during preparation. However, this still leaves the question as to whether behaviour management skills can be usefully taught in advance. Third, it is possible that the transfer of information from the foster carers to the adoptive parents could be arranged as a series of supervised meetings, so that every aspect of the child’s current behaviour could be shared by the ‘new’ parents and the social workers on whose advice they may have to depend in the next few months. This information would form the basis of discussions about how best to help the child to settle in his or her new family. Fourth, and probably the most useful for the adoptive parents, professional resources could then be shifted forward to the early months of placement where continuing assessment of the interaction between parents and the placed child can be more closely observed and more tailored parenting advice can be offered. This last option could reassure adopters taking on a child with difficulties which are either already known or may develop in the new placement that effective practical help will be at hand in the crucial early stages of the placement.

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Adoption Agencies Regulations, London: The Stationery Office, 2005


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