

Policy Paper

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Post-adoption support services: a critical element in successful and permanent adoptions

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About UnitingCare Children, Young People & Families

UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families (Uniting Care CYPF) provides a range of services, across the continuum of care, to children, young people and families in disadvantaged communities in NSW.

UnitingCare CYPF is a major provider of out-of-home care (OOHC) in NSW including the Mid North Coast, Orana Far West, and Western Sydney. These programs include foster care and residential care.

Jaanimili, our Aboriginal Services and Development Unit, is leading a partnership with UnitingCare Burnside to establish a new Aboriginal OOHC service, Ngurambang, covering the Dubbo, Narromine and Wellington areas. Jaanimilli and our UnitingCare Burnside's Western Sydney OOHC program is also working with Gaba Yulu to establish a new Aboriginal OOHC service in Western Sydney.

UnitingCare CYPF is also currently working towards becoming an accredited adoption agency to increase permanent planning options for non-Aboriginal children

Background

The Child Protection Reform Bill passed through the NSW Parliament on Wednesday 26 March 2014 and will come into effect on 29 October 2014. Under the reforms, where restoration is not possible, there is greater emphasis on adoption and long-term guardianship orders. The increased focus on permanency arrangements seeks to provide greater stability for children and young people who can no longer live safely with their birth families.

In this context, it is notable that currently, in NSW, there is very limited availability of post-adoption support services for people affected by adoption. Existing post-adoption services in NSW are mainly focused on past adoptions.

The Government, as yet, has made no provision for funding of these services. For example, there is no mention of post-adoption support in 'A Safe Home for Life', the report on the outcomes of public consultation on the child protection legislative reforms.¹

It is notable that the current standards for adoption include provision of post-adoption order support services.² However, the level of funding for adoption providers is not adequate to include this role.

This paper provides an overview of research on the benefits of post-adoption support and identifies the key elements of quality post-adoption support services. This is underpinned by the quest to achieve successful adoptions which provide permanency and security for the child, and reduce adoption disruption which is devastating for both the child and adoptive parents,

While post-adoption support services may also be used by birth parents and by persons who are seeking to trace and be reunited with relatives, this paper focuses on the post-adoption support needs of families who have adopted children who have been removed from their birth families. And while financial support is equally important, the focus of this paper is on non-financial support such as case work and assistance with contact arrangements.

Why is post-adoption support needed?

As the National Council for Adoption in the United Kingdom argues,

The joyous moment in a judge's chambers when the finalization of an adoption occurs is not the end of a child's story to permanency but rather the beginning of the rest of their story. Too often support and services for families disappear at this critical juncture of permanency, and children are left with a suitcase of questions and feelings of trauma and loss.³

Children who are adopted from the child protection system face many more challenges than other children. Adopted children have increased risks for emotional, developmental, behavioural problems, educational and health problems, linked to their early experiences of abuse, neglect and trauma.

As a result of children's adverse early experiences adoptive parents may need to cope with the behaviours of children who are withdrawn, defiant, aggressive and/or violent.⁴ Adoptive parents often need information and

guidance on how best to respond to their children's needs and behaviours and may benefit from services that strengthen their coping skills.

Adoptive families may also need support in negotiating and managing contact arrangements with birth families. Adoption in NSW is now 'open adoption' and recognises the benefit for children and their birth families to remain in contact with each other after an adoption order has been made. Birth and adoptive families may benefit from support to build a shared understanding of the goals of contact and establish collaborative working relationships with each other⁵. The ability of adoptive and birth relatives to collaborate with each other for the children's best interests is a significant protective factor in promoting resiliency and positive outcomes in adoptive families.⁶

Adoptive families – including birth children and adopted siblings – are put under enormous strain when the therapeutic, practical and emotional support needed by a child disturbed by early trauma is not available. Just as out-of-home care placements are jeopardised when these supports are lacking, adoptive placements may breakdown if these supports are not provided when required.

Adoption breakdown can result in huge emotional upheaval for both the child and the adoptive parents. For the child, the breakdown in this relationship comes on top of their previous experience of abuse and neglect and results in additional trauma.

Adoption breakdown also results in high financial costs for the Government and NGO agencies.

Research by Juliet Harper⁷ in NSW indicates that service providers can reduce the risk of disruption by: careful assessment of the adoptive family; providing follow-up casework supervision and support; and providing longer-term post-adoption counselling services focussed on particular issues and at particular stages of development.

Research on rates of adoption disruption

International studies have reported a wide range of disruption rates. This reflects differences in child-related factors such as the age range of children included in the studies and variation in the definition of 'disruption'. A recent study of adoption disruption in England which examined national adoption

data over a 12 year period, found the disruption rate after finalisation of adoption orders was 3.2%.⁸

Higher rates of adoption breakdowns are associated with children who are older at the time they are placed with their adoptive families, those who have histories of serious abuse or neglect, and those who have multiple previous placements⁹. In the recent national study of adoption disruptions in England, three-quarters of the children who experienced a disruption were older than four when placed with their adoptive family. In comparison, 70% of children in intact placements were under the age of four.¹⁰

It has often been assumed that foster carer adoptions are more stable than adoptions by strangers. It was thought that foster carers have well-established relationships with children and therefore have based their decision to adopt on a realistic view of the child's difficulties. However, the analysis of national data on adoptions in England found that foster care adoptions were *not* more stable.

The *Contact After Adoption* study in the United Kingdom has also found that relatively low levels of placement breakdown masks a significant group of families who are struggling, where the relationships between children and adoptive parents are strained.¹¹

Post-adoption support services in the United Kingdom and United States

The United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom (UK), the *Adoption and Children Act 2002* gave local authorities a duty to make a range of services available to meet the needs of people affected by adoption - before, during and after adoption. An Adoption Support Grant of £70 million over three years was provided for local authorities to fund the development of new adoption support services. People affected by adoption have the right to request an assessment of their needs for post-adoption support services. However, service provision in individual cases remains at the discretion of the local authority and access to services is very variable.¹²

The *Adoption and Children Act 2002* also contained important changes in the provision of services to birth parents. Birth families must have access to a range of support services such as counselling, advice and information, both before and after adoption.

The UK Government launched a new adoption reform program in 2012, *Action Plan for Adoption*. There were a number of measures that aim to improve provision of adoption support. Notably, these measures include free early education from two years of age for children who have been previously looked after. In England, children adopted from care also have priority access to social housing and priority admission to school places, so that adoptive parents can choose which school best suits their needs.¹³ Local authorities also have a new legal duty to inform adopters and prospective adopters of their rights.¹⁴ In 2013, the Government also announced a new £19.3 million Adoption Support Fund to pay for therapeutic services for adoptive children who need such support.¹⁵

The United States

In the United States (US), increases in the number of adoptions over the past two decades, particularly adoptions of children from foster care, have brought increased attention to the support needs of adopted children and their families. Previously, it was assumed that mainstream community services could meet the needs of adoptive families. However, as adoptive parents were unsuccessful in finding effective help for their children the need for specialised services became apparent. The importance of service providers understanding the unique aspects of adoption and the developmental impact of neglect, abuse and interrupted attachments on children was stressed by experts and adoptive parents.¹⁶ However, the provision of post-adoption services in the US remains patchy. And too often, preventative services are not available and services are available only when cumulative strain on the family has escalated to the point of crisis.¹⁷

Research evidence on the benefits of post-adoption services

It is notable that there is a dearth of Australian research or evaluation studies on post-adoption support. A small but growing body of research in the US and UK has found that quality post-adoption services support recruitment of adoptive families, promote family well-being and help to prevent breakdown of adoptions.

Recruitment of adoptive families

In the US, Casey Family Services has found that assurance of support following adoption plays a critical role in many prospective adoptive parents' decisions to go forward with the adoption – whether children are adopted by their current foster families or new families recruited for them.¹⁸

Conversely, lack of such services has been identified by adoptive parents as a barrier to adoption from foster care – 43% of parents responding to a survey reported that this represented a major barrier for them in considering adoption.¹⁹

Promoting family well-being and preventing breakdown of adoption

There is evidence of a strong relationship between providing post-adoption support and the health, well-being and stability of families.

A randomised evaluation of an adoption support program provided by Casey Family Services in Maine, using a family-centred case management and therapeutic model, found significant improvements in child behaviour.²⁰ Adoptive parents also reported higher levels of trust in their children. Significantly, adopted children in the intervention group had significantly lower physical and behavioural health care costs.

Another US study of barriers and success factors for adoption from foster care, lack of support services was cited by both parents and adoption professionals as a key reason that adoptions broke down. Conversely, parents noted that agencies helped contribute to adoption success by providing ongoing emotional support, training and information.²¹

A study of adopted children with special needs found that those families receiving post-adoption services reported higher parental satisfaction. In contrast, those with unmet support needs reported lower parent-child relationship quality and more negative impact on their family and marital relationships.²²

In the UK, an evaluation of two parent support programs for adoptive parents found that new adoptive parents who were experiencing significant difficulties benefited from both behavioural and educational parenting interventions.²³ Negative parenting approaches to misbehaviour (such as threats and shouting) were significantly reduced in the intervention groups compared with the control group. Adoptive parents who received the interventions were also less likely to be frustrated or anxious and more likely to have a sense that they were doing a good job in their role as a parent.

Key features of quality post-adoption support services

Research consistently highlights the following features of effective post-adoption programs:

A continuum of services, including preventative support

It is important that there is a continuum of services available spanning preventative services, crisis intervention and ongoing support.

A proactive approach to staying in touch with adoptive families and providing information on the services available is vital as families may be reluctant to ask for help. By providing preventative support in a timely way, services can address problems early and prevent them escalating.²⁴

Research in the UK found that parents are often reluctant to ask for support (because they may be perceived as failing) and do not seek help until they are at the point of crisis. The findings highlight the importance of normalising the need for support, along with continuity of adoption staff and services (rather than having a separate unit) to help parents feel able to request help.²⁵

Preventative services can strengthen families by helping parents understand what to expect over the course of their child's development, building their

skills for dealing with challenge, and promoting protective factors in children and families, for example, social support networks.²⁶

Parents need access to a flexible range of formal and informal support options including: support with contact arrangements; therapeutic interventions for children; peer and social support networks; respite care; and coordination and advocacy with other systems such as schools and mental health services.

Research consistently highlights opportunities for peer and social support for both adoptive parents and children as an important part of the service mix.²⁷

Peer support services have been linked to reduced isolation and improvements in parenting knowledge, confidence and commitment to working through problems.²⁸ Families who participate regularly in peer support groups also tend to seek help sooner, before situations reach the point of crisis. For adopted children, meeting up with other adopted children can reduce their anxiety about being the only person in a care situation.²⁹

Services that are specific to the needs of adoptive children and their families

Adoptive families face additional challenges that are different from those of families formed biologically. Post-adoption services must address the effects of early trauma, separation and loss, and identity issues.³⁰ Service providers need a sound understanding of the unique dynamics and impacts of adoption, the developmental impact of abuse, and experience in trauma-informed care.

Ongoing availability

Post-adoption support services should be available as they are needed by adoptive families at various times throughout a child's development when adoption-related issues arise.³¹ It is notable that in the recent national study in England nearly two thirds of the adoption disruptions occurred during the teenage years.³²

Children who have experienced trauma can continue to express developmental, behavioural and social difficulties many years into a stable placement. Also, issues relating to contact may resurface at different times as the child or young person matures and adoptive families may need support in renegotiating and managing these arrangements.³³ It is essential to maintain

the principles of 'open adoption' including constructive contact with birth families.

As Lewis et al suggest, adoptive families need timely help at key developmental and transition points, such as around the time when children start school and at the transition from primary to high school.³⁴ Just as children in foster care may experience difficulties with their peers over their care arrangements, adoptive children may be bullied by other students about their family circumstances.³⁵ Children and adoptive families may need support in addressing these and other school-related issues.

Post-adoptive support models in other Australian states and territories

South Australia

In South Australia, Post-Adoption Support Services (PASS) is provided by Relationships Australia and funded by the South Australian Department of Education and Child Development. PASS provides trauma-informed counselling information and support for people affected by adoption.

Services include therapeutic parenting classes for adoptive parents whose children have a history of early trauma and broken attachments. For adoptive parents who have attended the therapeutic parenting classes, PASS offers an ongoing support group. The group enables parents to come together to discuss what they have learnt, how they are using these tools in their families, and get support and encouragement from others. The service also runs a peer support program for children who have been adopted. Older adoptees act as mentors and provide support to younger people. PASS also provides a support group for birth mothers.³⁶

ACT

In the ACT, post-adoption support is provided through the Adoptions and Permanent Care Unit of the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services. The unit provides information, mediation and counselling services for those affected by adoption. Notably, this includes follow-up and support to adoptive families, as requested, at any time after an adoption order has been

made. Case work support is often focused around facilitating contact arrangements and assisting supervision of contact where there are difficulties.³⁷

Conclusion

Successful adoptions and permanence depend not only on good preparation but also on ongoing support of adoptive families through quality post-adoption services.

NSW is at the beginning of a journey towards increased use of open adoption, while the US and UK are much further down this path. There is an opportunity to learn from their experience and avoid making the same mistakes. This includes building capacity in the system for provision of quality post-adoption support. Over time, there will be savings in OOHC due to less children coming into care. Some of these savings should be redirected into proving post-adoption support.

Research shows that by investing in quality post-adoption services, we will strengthen family functioning and child wellbeing and prevent breakdown of adoptions. Efforts to recruit more adoptive families will also be supported by families having confidence that ongoing help will be available to them after the adoption is finalised.

Effective post-adoption services offer a flexible mix of support options and provide continuing support over time as they are needed by adoptive families. A proactive approach to staying in touch with adoptive families and providing information on the services available is vital as families may be reluctant to ask for help. By providing preventative support in a timely way, services can address problems early and prevent them escalating. Continuity of adoption staff and services may also help parents feel able to request help before a crisis occurs.

This review of research evidence has also identified a major gap in research on post-adoption support in Australia. Researchers from the School of Social Work at Griffith University are currently conducting a national study on post-adoption support for families adopting from overseas.³⁸ However, there is a clear need for Australian research and evaluation studies relating to provision of post-adoption support in a child protection context.

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