

# Therapeutic Support for Adoptive Families & Families with Permanently Placed Children & Adolescents



Pre-adoption  
Post-adoption  
Permanency  
Advice &  
Counselling

## A specialist therapeutic service

PAC's Child & Family Service offers a specialist therapeutic service for families with adopted or permanently placed children/adolescents. We have particular expertise in providing consultation, assessment and therapeutic services to families whose children experienced developmental trauma (i.e. early life, chronic and pervasive neglect and abuse), attachment breaks and other traumas prior to their adoption/permanent placement. Working with black and minority ethnic children/young people and multi-racial families is very much part of our expertise.

## Typical difficulties families present with

The **Children** and **Adolescents** we work with have more often than not experienced severe and chronic trauma prior to their adoption. They may have experienced very poor care and/or abuse in their birth homes and they are likely to have been separated from at least one, but often more than one foster family (whom they may have been very close to). For a young child none of these experiences make sense; it just leaves them confused, broken hearted, angry and unable to regulate themselves. They can therefore present as impulsive, hyper-active, defiant and aggressive; their emotional responses vary between being flat and highly reactive; they can seem generally 'switched off', depressed and they may self harm. Most children/adolescents we work with find transitions difficult and persevering in new activities or reaching new goals can seem very taxing indeed. They struggle with friendships and can alternate between wanting to be close to their adoptive parents/permanent carers/family and rejecting them, or even being abusive towards them. Some children are withdrawn or socially awkward; others can be over familiar with strangers.

Most children and young people who attend sessions at PAC wonder about their birth parents, siblings and other birth relatives; they question whether and when they can have contact with them. Identity issues are very common and have an important additional dimension in children and young people who were transracially adopted or who are part of a multi-racial family.

The **Parents** who attend PAC have often tried to reach and support their children in many different ways; they have run out of ideas and energy and feel frustrated, disheartened and isolated. Some parents have resorted to somewhat desperate, unhelpful parenting strategies and others feel like giving up. When parenting as a couple, parents may find that their responses to challenging behaviours vary significantly. Parents usually wish to receive help with understanding their children and their own responses. They also want to receive more effective and satisfying parenting strategies. They all hope that family harmony will increase for all family members.

## Referrals, fees & funding

Referrals can be made by parents, social workers or other professionals. Fees are provided on request. PAC will write letters to request funding from local authorities, from health insurance or other potential funding bodies. Private funding is welcome too.

## Overall therapeutic approach

PAC's Child and Family Service actively involves the parents in most of their therapeutic family work. Therapeutic parent sessions (see below) will take place first. The subsequent therapeutic family sessions involve **parent/s and one child** at any one time (though a family session with all family members may be included at the beginning and/or the end of these sessions). This is based on the premise that most of the children we work with have experienced trauma (i.e. abuse, neglect, attachment breaks) within their primary relationships; they therefore need to experience and 're-learn' that their new parents are safe and can keep them safe; the parents need support to hear and empathically contain their child's most disturbing memories, feelings and thoughts whilst also setting clear and safe boundaries. Even where children have not experienced major traumas, the support of parents in sessions has proven to be essential with regard to enhancing the child's/ adolescent's relationships within the family. The length of PAC's therapeutic family sessions (often 120 min) allows for some individual time for child and parents.

## Initial consultation and assessment

To explore the presenting difficulties an initial **parent consultation** will be offered to parents. This may be followed by a **family consultation**. Recommendations with regard to some practical parenting strategies and other actions parents can take will be made. These sessions are usually followed by recommendations with regard to further assessments and therapeutic interventions.

## Comprehensive assessments

To assess a family's presenting difficulties a range of more in depth assessments are available at PAC, such as a comprehensive **family** assessment, a **parent-child interaction** assessment, assessment of **contact** needs/arrangements or a **viability** assessment. **Parent assessments** are available for parents who are seriously struggling with certain aspects in their relationship and/or parenting; parent assessments with regard to particular issues are also available **pre-adoption/ pre-placement**.

Our **assessment methods** include reading of all relevant background information, interview and observation, a range of questionnaires and psycho-diagnostic measures, projective methods (**DANS, Story Stems, Sandplay**), art and play methods (**Theraplay MIM**), semi-structured interviews (**ASI**) as well as some **creative methods** using the arts, film and documentary footage and communication exercises.

Additional assessments by specialists associated with PAC may be advised, such as a Sensory Processing assessment, Educational assessment or Child/Adolescent Psychiatric assessment.

## Intensive Therapeutic Parent Work

### Aim

Parenting a previously traumatised child can trigger parents' own issues around adoption, attachment, loss, trauma and self-regulation. The aim of PAC's intensive therapeutic parent work is to address these issues with regard to their impact on the parenting challenges adoptive parents and permanent carers face. This work needs to be undertaken so that **parents can be strengthened in their function of 'secure base' for the child** as well as develop the skills needed to **become 'therapeutic' parents**.

The issues the parent/s bring and their way of working with us will in part determine the therapeutic process. Approximate figures with regard to number of sessions are given below, followed by typical issues addressed and methods used.

### Number and length of sessions

We may suggest between 6 and 18 hours which can take place in sessions of 90 min, 2 hours or 3 hours. The sessions may take place with one or two therapists, depending on the presenting issues.

### Typical issues addressed & methods used

Sessions are carefully prepared; the following are likely to be addressed:

- ❖ parents are asked to fill in a **questionnaire** about their own upbringing, major life events, current family life and hopes and expectations around adopting their child;
- ❖ parents are asked to fill in some **standardised psycho-diagnostic measures** regarding their current psychological, and in particular their parenting, strengths and vulnerabilities; the results will be fed back to them;
- ❖ using the **arts** (painting, miniature figures, letter writing, etc.) as well as **EMDR** and **Somatic Experiencing** parent/s are supported in **addressing some of their personal life** stories relating to attachment, loss and trauma;
- ❖ where there are two parents, they may have some **separate sessions** to address certain issues individually;
- ❖ parents are introduced to and practice a **communication technique** that will help them communicate their thoughts and feelings whilst **being a 'secure base' for each other**;
- ❖ parents are supported in exploring what **changes they need to make** in their daily lives to meet the challenges of being 'therapeutic' parents;
- ❖ therapeutic **parenting strategies** are addressed and supported with **resources**;
- ❖ **home tasks** will be given (such as undertaking certain activities with each other and the children, listening to a parenting CD, watching a therapeutic parenting DVD, reading books/handouts, etc.)

### Monitoring of progress & outcomes

Pre- and post-intervention **standardised questionnaires** with regard to parenting their child will be used. Parents are asked to give qualitative feedback at the beginning of each session.

### Report & network meeting

A summary report of intensive therapeutic parent work can be commissioned and/or a network meeting which would involve PAC, the parent/s, the commissioning agency and any other relevant party.

## Intensive Therapeutic Family Work

### Aim

The overall aim of intensive therapeutic family work is to **enhance family life for both the child and the parents**. The specific aim is to reduce the emotional charge and debilitating effects of the child's exposure to developmental trauma, whilst supporting the formation of 'corrective' experiences that will lead to **improved self-regulation, attachment and the development of more age appropriate behaviour, skills and interests**. Strengthening the child's sense of **adoptive, cultural and ethnic identity** is integral to this process.

After working on stabilising the child through sensory work, theraplay/developmental play and emotional literacy work, the **aim is to help the child/adolescent process their early life traumas and attachment breaks**; this is done with a number of different methods (see below) and the child/adolescent is emotionally supported by their adoptive parents/permanent carers throughout. PAC's intensive therapeutic family work therefore assumes the presence and commitment of at least one positive attachment figure, and only one child in the family is worked with intensively at any one time.

The issues the child/adolescent brings and their way of engaging with us will in part determine the therapeutic process. Approximate figures with regard to number of sessions are given below, followed by typical issues addressed and methods used.

### Number and length of sessions

We may suggest between 16 hours and 48 hours, which can take place in sessions of 1.5 hours to 3 hours). The sessions may take place with one or two therapists, depending on the presenting issues.

### Issues to be addressed & methods used

Parents are usually prepared for intensive therapeutic family work by undertaking intensive therapeutic parent work first (see previous page).

Intensive family sessions are carefully prepared; some of the following may be addressed:

- ❖ the child is **helped to feel safe and regulated** in PAC's therapeutic space;
- ❖ the child is supported in their **sensory processing and integration**;
- ❖ parents and child are introduced to and supported in **theraplay** to help bonding and regulation;
- ❖ the child practices **identifying, naming, locating, expressing and 'bearing' feelings** in self and others;
- ❖ addressing, processing and integrating past traumatic experiences through **art, drama, play, EMDR and Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy** (where appropriate) is at the core of our work;
- ❖ specific methods are used to **help a child who dissociates**;
- ❖ the child is supported to **use their parents as a safe base** (both in the sessions and at home)
- ❖ the function and dysfunction of their **behaviours will be addressed**;
- ❖ the child is helped to explore and positively develop their **adoptive, cultural and ethnic identity**;
- ❖ parent/s are **supported via telephone/email** between sessions as necessary;
- ❖ **strengths and achievements** will be celebrated.

### **Monitoring of progress & outcomes**

Pre- and post-intervention **standardised questionnaires** with regard to emotional, behavioural and attachment difficulties are used. Parents and children/adolescents will be asked to give qualitative feedback at the beginning of each session.

### **Report**

A summary report can be commissioned and/or a network meeting which would involve PAC, the parent/s, the commissioning agency and any other relevant party.

## **Additional Aspects of PAC's Intensive Therapeutic Work**

- ❖ Telephone/email liaison with social worker where necessary
- ❖ Telephone/email liaison with school where necessary
- ❖ Home visits where necessary
  
- ❖ Regular internal case discussion
- ❖ External specialist supervision
- ❖ Ongoing training for staff

### **❖ support for the child's/adolescent's school**

A Big Lottery grant makes it possible for PAC to provide training sessions in schools at a very low cost. The challenges faced by teaching and support staff can be overwhelming when trying to support and teach previously traumatised children. PAC's dedicated Schools Trainer is a Senior Educational Psychologist who trains and works with school staff so that they are better equipped to support and include these children in school. Please contact [julia@pac.org.uk](mailto:julia@pac.org.uk)

## **PAC's Child & Family Service**

**Professional, qualified and informed:** about therapy and trauma, attachment and adoption related issues

**Sensitive and supportive:** of all parties in the family

**Family focused:** all families - traditional, same sex and single parents - are welcome; children/adolescents and parents are fully involved.

**Racially and culturally aware:** enhanced by our multi-cultural and multi-racial team

**Directive with empathy:** so that core issues are addressed pro-actively and sensitively

**Team work minded:** committed to working together with social workers and parents

**Multi-modal:** theraplay, EMDR, DDP, Somatic Experiencing as well as art, drama and music are combined

**PAC provides additional Child and Family Services, please visit our website.**

**PAC also has a wide-ranging advice and counselling service for adults who were adopted or long term fostered as children and for birth parents and other birth relatives.**

**PAC has an extensive training programme for professionals and for adoptive parents.**

**Our website provides details on the full range of our adoption/permanent placement support services:**

**[www.pac.org.uk](http://www.pac.org.uk)**

Contact us:

**PAC  
5 Torriano Mews  
Torriano Avenue  
London NW5 2RZ**

**Advice Line:  
020 7284 5879**

**Mon to Fri 10am – 1pm  
Wed & Thu 5.30pm – 7.30pm**

**email: [advice@pac.org.uk](mailto:advice@pac.org.uk)**

**fax: 020 7482 2367**



Registered Charity number: 294998

Company limited by guarantee registration: 2040322

PAC is registered with Ofsted under the Care Standards Act 2000 as an Adoption Support Agency; Ofsted registration: SC066981

PAC is a member of CASA (Consortium for Adoption Support Agencies)