

A NOTE ON ADOPTION MATCHING

Over the last four years I have seen numerous examples of extremely conscientious, sometimes meticulous efforts to match a child waiting for adoption with adopters. The good intentions of those who work in this area are not in doubt. Many of them believe passionately that matching is a precise science. DfE guidance – now being revised – has previously supported this view in saying:

Making a good match between a child and a prospective adopter is a highly skilled task.

In fact, there is scant evidence to support the view that practitioners can effectively discriminate between different prospective parents for any particular child. But the process of matching is time consuming, expensive, desperately frustrating to adopters, and, most importantly, is to the disadvantage of children because of the delay it involves. The mean time between placement order and match has deteriorated significantly over the last few years (while adopter recruitment has become faster). The mean number of days between Placement Order and match is now 216 days and there are some indications that it's getting worse still. This is not a statistical blip: the median time between placement order and match has also been deteriorating.

What the research says about about matching

Research cannot tell us how to do matching. What it can and does tell us is that there is very little evidence available to justify current – often very time consuming – approaches to matching. As Selwyn and Quinton concluded in 2006:

Given the effort that goes into matching, it might be thought that there is good evidence that we know how often matching is achieved and that a good match makes a difference. Such research evidence is lacking; not just sparse, but virtually absent.

Or as Quinton writing alone said in *Matching Adoptions* 2011:

The idea of matching parental capacities to children's needs... is now firmly part of policy and practice [But] many of the characteristics of children and parents that should be taken into account are not well defined, their assessment is not yet part of social work training, and cannot be assessed in advance of the parents and children coming together.

Characteristics of children and adopters

While there is scant evidence to justify the time expended on matching or evidence of practitioner ability to differentiate between different, but similar, prospective adopters, there is evidence about the characteristics of children which are linked to adoption breakdown as well as the characteristics of adopters which are linked to adoption success. Child factors related to the success of adoption (as measured by breakdown) include:

- age, the older the child the greater the risk;
- a history of disruptions;
- the number of prior foster placements and the time already spent in placements
- a history of maltreatment (particularly sexual abuse);
- close relationship to the birth family;
- emotional and behavioural difficulties; and
- preferential rejection - being selected as the only child in the birth family to be adopted

But as Quinton asserts:

Unfortunately there are no data that shed any light on how well these areas of difficulty are or can be assessed prior to placement, nor on whether it is possible in advance to identify prospective adopters who might be best able to cope with them.

What we now know about successful adopters is often counter to long held and deeply established views. Research demonstrates that previously emphasised demographic characteristics, including parental age, single status, ethnicity, occupation, sexual orientation, income or education are not linked to success in adoption. Indeed research has revealed that four previously and

commonly found prejudices in local authority matching policy are not only unsupported by research but are exposed as fallacious. First, younger adopters are not likely to be more successful adopters: increased parental age is correlated with greater stability in adoptions. Secondly, single adopters are no less likely to be successful in adoption than couples, and this despite the reality that single adopters often adopt older and more challenging children. Thirdly, those who have already brought up children are not more likely to be successful adopters (they may find it difficult to change their parenting style). And fourth, gay and lesbian adopters do not introduce levels of risk into the placement through exposing the child to an untypical family composition, prompting overt discrimination for the child in the playground.

As Quinton has asserted, successful adopters are simply likely to be committed, flexible, open communicators and willing to listen to advice.

Ethnicity and matching

The success of transracial placements is now very clear. Research both in the USA and the UK has consistently revealed that problems of adjustment and self-esteem are no more present in transracial placements than in matched ethnicity placements and disruptions are not higher. Yet, ethnic or cultural considerations have taken absolute precedence in matching decisions for many years. As Julie Selwyn *and colleagues* found:

Social Workers' top priorities when searching for adopters are firstly ethnicity, culture and promoting positive identity while warmth, love, commitment and putting a child's needs first comes a poor second.

Adopter led matching

There is a case for allowing would be adopters a much greater role in initiating matches. That is not to say that potential matches should not be scrutinised by professionals, but we should place greater trust in adopters' capacity to identify a child with whom they feel an attachment. We should recognise that there is an essential chemistry involved in that process. As Julie Selwyn observed in her recent research into adoption breakdown,

adopters often have - even though they might hide it - a gut reaction to children.

Adoption Activity Days emphatically recognise the role of chemistry in forming a bond between adults and children. But such intuitive responses are sometimes not trusted by professionals.

One of the best examples of adopter led matching occurs when foster carers decide to adopt the child or children they are fostering. Such approaches are often rebuffed, despite evidence from the USA (where the great majority of adoptions are of children initially looked after on a fostering basis) which shows such adoptions as being more stable than other adoption in the USA.

The evidence suggests that a great deal more pragmatism in matching and a greater role for adopters in initiating matches would not endanger placements. It would certainly lead to faster matching. That is not to argue that the suitability of a child for particular adopters can be established only by the adopters themselves. But we need to trust adopters more to start the process.

And we need to be less prescriptive about the sort of child for which adopters might be suited. The belief that particular adopters should be restricted to the adoption of one sort of child, whether categorised by age, gender or some other characteristic is not evidence based. I attended a panel relatively recently where a couple, she, white Italian and he, Black African, were approved to adopt but were recommended for a child of joint Mediterranean/African background. Such a child may never be found. That may be an extreme example, but the tendency for Panels to prescribe the sort of child suitable for particular adopters - and thereby sometimes reducing adopter flexibility and confidence - remains widespread. It may unnecessarily blind adopters to children whom they might love and for whom they would be very successful adopters.

Conclusion

The reality of matching and what the evidence tells us is best summarized by this from David Quinton and Julie Selwyn in *Adoption Research, Policy and Practice* (2006):

Matching now means the process through which practitioners try to find adopters who have the capacities to meet the needs of children approved for adoption. This intention can hardly be criticised but the rhetoric might lead one to presume that we know how to assess needs, how to assess parents who can meet them and can tell whether needs have been met.

The case for greater pragmatism in matching, for greater speed (since we know with certainty that delay harms a child waiting for adoption) and for routinely allowing adopters the initiative in arriving at matches is very strong. Managers in local authority and voluntary sector adoption agencies need carefully to review their practices and ensure they are not based on expectations of effectiveness which are not supported by evidence.

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