



Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

“Every day is different”

Q&A with an Adoption Professional: Bridget Betts, After Adoption

Bridget Betts is the National Manager of the SafeBase Therapeutic Parenting Programme at After Adoption. She has been a social worker for 37 years. Her role has included the training, assessment, preparation and support of carers and the preparation of children for permanence and adoption, including the completion of life story work. Bridget has produced three interactive CDs for use with children, one film and three books.

What is an average day like in your role?

There is no such thing as an average day! What I enjoy about this job is that every day is different. I am responsible for the management and delivery of SafeBase nationally so my role involves a lot of travel to our regional offices.

I enjoy working with staff across After Adoption who all bring something different in terms of their knowledge and expertise to SafeBase. So in an average week I may be in Manchester, Birmingham or the North East involved in meetings with business development, meeting with colleagues in Families that Last and Talk Adoption to share ideas and materials that are common to our work, meeting with our web developers to design an online forum for SafeBase, supervising staff, working on writing new materials for SafeBase or chairing a SafeBase trainers day.

Could you give a summary of the SafeBase programme?

SafeBase is a therapeutic parenting programme for all adoptive families and other permanent carers, including families with older children and teenagers. SafeBase is a strengths-based approach which seeks to develop and strengthen the personal resources, confidence and resilience of carers and to develop the specific skills needed to care for and nurture a looked after child.

Prior to the course we ask parents and carers to complete a parental self-reflection. Developing the capacity to reflect is one of the core concepts of the SafeBase programme. How you make sense of your childhood experiences has a profound effect on how you parent your own children. This questionnaire is to help parents to begin to reflect on their own experiences as a child and of being parented and also to prepare for the 4 day programme. There is an opportunity to discuss their reflections as part of the feedback session which follows the family session.

The programme has 3 elements delivered over a 5-week period:

The Family Session is based on the principles of Theraplay® and helps families to understand the interactions within their family. The family are asked to carry out a series of simple play activities and a SafeBase trainer observes and discretely films the session. This provides a valuable insight to a parent’s strengths and ways in which they can build on these strengths and manage the challenges that their child may present. We then

arrange a follow up feedback session to discuss identified strengths and challenges in detail; parents receive a copy of the film and a detailed written report.

The 4-day Parenting Programme is based on the principles of Theraplay®. The programme is designed to help parents better understand their child and their behaviours. It also gives practical techniques that will help them to feel more competent and effective as a parent

On-going Support We provide on-going support, including regional topic-based groups, which enable parents and carers to meet together. They also have access to an online community where they can share experiences with other families.

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We also deliver a SafeBase in Schools programme which uses a whole school approach. The training for teaching staff includes practical techniques for support, improving understanding of the challenges adopted and looked after children face, and practical strategies based upon Theraplay® principles.

What feedback have you had from programme beneficiaries?

The positive benefits of the programme are reflected in families’ feedback and evaluation which demonstrates an increase in carers’ confidence, insight and skills and that these benefits boost both carers’ and children’s wellbeing and gives hope for the future. Participants have also consistently commented that the course is well informed with a good mix of theory and practical learning and opportunities to learn from others. There is also a consistent strong positive response to the trainers especially their humour, approachability, empathy, knowledge and also of their genuine interest in the families and their children.

What have you learnt through working on this project?

Working with this programme has consolidated my view that parents and carers of children who have experienced trauma and abuse need accessible, ongoing support to help them understand their children’s inner lives and to make sense of how their children greet the world and relationships.

The SafeBase programme clearly makes a difference in terms of parents and carers gaining a greater insight into their child and their behaviour and the opportunity to reflect on their own parenting style. The use of Theraplay® principles and activities gives a framework for parents to engage with their child in a non-threatening and fun way and this is one of the elements of the programme that brings about change. On a personal level it has been magical to watch this change happening for parents and carers when I have observed the delivery of SafeBase programmes. I have also been touched by the sense of hope and optimism that emerges during the course of a programme even when parents have arrived feeling exhausted, negative and for some, in despair for the future.

How do you use and try to think about evidence in your everyday work with this project?

We have been working on a new logic model for SafeBase which seeks to demonstrate a clear link between the activities and inputs provided as part of each intervention and the intended outcomes, through identified mechanisms of change.

These models have been developed in conjunction with the internal team in After Adoption alongside Dr Heather Ottoway from Bristol University and informed by work carried out by Aleron. They are built on the experiences and learning from over a decade of developing and delivering the SafeBase Programme to over 1,500 adoptive families across England and Wales and After Adoption's wider work supporting all parties to adoption.

We have been collecting data regularly about the SafeBase programme. This includes a baseline questionnaire (Likert-type scale), completed before and immediately after the intervention; and a follow-up questionnaire

sent out to all previous participants at six-monthly intervals, which includes Likert-type questions and a section for written comments. We are currently working with Nottingham Trent University to evaluate the programme over the past 12 years. The objectives of the evaluation are:

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1. To assess the short and long-term impact of the SafeBase parenting programme on parents and carers
2. To identify strengths and weaknesses of the programme
3. To suggest how the programme might develop into the future

Having been to a number of CVAA Practice Sharing events, is there anything in particular that you have reflected on as a result?

It has been great to have the space to think and reflect about practice with colleagues from across the sector. In my view the opportunity to share and discuss good practice in a forum like this is invaluable. It has certainly made me reflect on how we evaluate our practice; ensure that it is evidence based and the mechanisms to achieve this e.g. using logic models. Some of the input we have had from guest speakers has been thought provoking and has got me thinking about how we can offer more effective support in some areas of our service delivery e.g. in being more effective in how we support sibling relationships.