

CVAA Practice Workshops: Transitions: managing introductions, relationships with foster carers, moving children after disruptions, July 2018.

Please find below a summary of CVAA's Practice Workshops held at CCS Adoption in Bristol on 27th June and at Caritas Care in Preston on 5th July 2018.

CVAA are grateful to Emma Simpson, CCS, and Kate Knowles, Caritas Care, for hosting these events in their agencies and for sharing their approaches and experiences in working in transitions. We were very lucky to be joined by Leanne, an inspiring Caritas Care foster carer who spoke to delegates at our event in Preston, highlighting the vital role foster carers can play in ensuring children experience a positive transition, and the importance of valuing and supporting our foster carers.

If you are a CVAA member and interested in connecting with colleagues and receiving regular updates on this topic, please email [Leah Mair](mailto:Leah.Mair@cvaa.org.uk) to enquire about joining CVAA's *Community of Practice* on this subject area. Please also note there is a wealth of resources available to CVAA member practitioners on our website, including our speakers' slides from these workshops. Register for our website by [clicking here](#).

Background: the research

- What does the data tell us?
 - The Children's Commissioner Children in Care and Care Leavers Survey (2015) reported that 39.6% of children in care had moved between one and three times and 10.7% four or more times.
 - The ALB data shows us that the average time for adopted children from entry to care to placement is 15 months (march 2018).
 - For all children placed from Q1-Q4 2016-17 the average time from placement order to placement was 204 days.
 - Of all children placed from Q1-Q4 2016-17 the average at placement of children placed by VAAs was 3 years 7.5 months; this corresponds with an average of 2 years 6 months for all children placed (VAAs and LAs)
- CVAA member *Family Futures* has published a number of free to access practice papers, including this paper on transitions; '[Planning Transitions for Children moving to Permanent Placement: What do you do after you say "hello"?](#)'
- CoramBAAF have published a practice note which provides guidance for social workers and policy makers on managing meetings between prospective adopters and children prior to matching; [Practice Note 64: Best practice in meetings between prospective adopters and children prior to matching](#). A range of "pre-meets" are starting to be used by agencies, and this Practice Note sets out the benefits and challenges of this approach.
- UEA's Practice Programme; '[Moving to Adoption: A three stage framework for thinking about a child's move to adoption](#)' is underpinned by the [secure base model](#). It is currently being piloted with Norfolk CC and another LA.
- Fostering Devon and Devon Adoption follow a 7-stage model which includes: adopter training, assessment and approval, decision making for the child, adopters being matched with their child, continuing of the child's story, child's transition to adoptive placement, the nesting period and finally, moving on whilst maintaining contact with significant carers. Find out more by reading their

practice guidance: '[Good practice in supporting a fostered child's transition to their new adoptive family](#)'.

- The Centre for Research on Children and Families, UEA has much to say on transitions in its document entitled '[The joys and challenges of adoptive family life: a survey in conjunction with Yorkshire and Humberside](#)', Neil et al.

Key Points

Listed below are the key points identified by practitioners at CVAA practice workshops, to be considered carefully when working within transitions.

- **Practicalities and planning;** including timing, geographical distance and diary management of adopters, foster carers and social workers.
- **Preparation of foster carers;** we aren't in control of what children have experienced in their foster placements but we do know that it has had an important effect, whether they formed attachments, or had a less positive experience. Value and involve your foster carers as much as possible as they may hold knowledge of the child, and the child's trust.
- **The educational impact;** moving to a new school or nurse may involve leaving friends, carers and a place where you comfortable, as well as possibly interrupting educational development.
- **Risks and complications;** consider all possible risks and prepare your adopters thoroughly for potential outcomes.
- **Be creative:** transitions should be considered on a case by case basis. Consider pre meets, creative therapies, contact after a match and other innovative practices. You may like to contact colleagues in other VAAs when faced with a difficult case. It is likely somebody in your network has experience you might find helpful.

The Child: making transitions child centred

- Remember that wherever a child is going, it is going to be daunting.
- The research tells us that taking **time** over transitions is always more positive for the child, yet continuously introductions are being carried out in two weeks or less. If we begin telling adopters that transitions take, for example one month, they will accept this. Additionally, we should be ready to pause introductions where necessary. As well as timing, being attuned to the child's needs is essential.
- Consider every aspect of a child's personality and experience when making a transition plan. For example, how many moves have they experienced? What are their mental and emotional ages? Where children have been in separate foster places and are coming together in an adoptive placement, what are the considerations? Think about all the people in the child's life such as adopters, friends, carers, teachers.
- Talk to others who have placed **sibling groups** who may currently be living separately; exchange ideas and experiences.
- **Child specific recruitment**, for example as carried out by After Adoption, gives adopters information about the child very early on. This helps us to pre-empt a narrative for the child so that they understand what is happening.
- **Bump into meetings** can make a match much stronger and take away a lot of the pressure for children on their first meeting. This is also a good opportunity to test the rapport between your foster carers and adoptive parents.
- Where children are **moving to a new school or nursery** consider encouraging their old classmates or teacher to write them a letter wishing them luck. Encourage the child to reply, explaining how they are getting on in their new school. This sends the message that children have not been forgotten by those they felt a connection with in their previous home, and that they can stay in touch if they want to. Where possible arrange that children begin their new schools at the start of a new term so they aren't the only person in the class for which everything is new. Some agencies, including After

Adoption, Barnardo's, Family Futures and PAC-UK have an **educational advisor** to support children in their new schools and help adoptive parents liaise with schools.

- We should always carry out **midway reviews**. They are increasingly happening at the end of introductions, yet are intended to be a chance to review how the child is responding and whether we need to change our approach.
- If children can have contact with their carers beyond moving into their adoptive placement, explain to them that the move is simply about their family growing larger; children don't have to lose completely one set of trusting relationships to be able to form another. It can be very beneficial to bring all those in the child's life together to share memories or qualities they love about the child, to demonstrate to children that they are not moving on because they are unwanted.

Foster carers: valuing our carers

- Important qualities in foster carers include: being flexible and able to cope with change, having support from their own networks and being willing and able to seek support.
- As well as bump into meetings with the children, consider **pre-meets between foster carers and adoptive parents before initial introductions begin**. St David's Children's Society, for example, bring together potential adoptive parents and foster carers before a match if they have a strong link. This gives adoptive parents an opportunity to really decide if they want to go ahead. We could consider making this type of pre-meet standard practice.
- Foster carers may be in a rush to go through transitions because of their own commitments. We should inform them about the role they play and the difference it can make for them to take part in longer introductions by **producing a leaflet which explains the research around transitions**, and that doing introductions properly will benefit all parties in the future. VAAs could set the tone for valuing foster carers rather than making them invisible.
- **Consider the needs of your foster carers**, for example they may have birth children who they need to support and factor in when planning introductions. In addition, children may have made friends and connections with the birth children within their foster placements, if they see these friends approve of their new parents they will likely feel more comfortable about moving.
- Then, involve foster carers in planning for transitions as early on as possible to avoid any chance that they might openly or covertly obstruct plans. Similarly, **make sure adopters are aware that foster carers' involvement is not a threat to them**; it is about ensuring our children don't miss out on something that could be extremely healing for them.
- Consider the different parenting styles between your foster carers and adoptive parents, and the effect these differences could have on children. **Open communication** is the best way to ensure this is not confusing for children. Leanne, a Caritas Care foster carer, shared with CVAA her very positive experience of staying in close contact with the adoptive parents of the children she fostered. Always being on the end of the phone meant that particularly in the early stages of a placement she could help the adoptive parents diagnose specific issues and advise on how to best help the children. Staying in touch also means that as the children grow up, they have someone who they can go to if they have questions about what they were like as a baby, keeping a golden thread of information.
- Having identified the crucial role foster carers can play, it is important that we **value and acknowledge their contribution**. We may want to consider bringing back rest days and we should be encouraging our adoptive parents to try to stay in touch with the foster carers, and perhaps provide a gift to say thank you. VAAs may also want to show thanks to foster carers by producing a letter which explains the support VAAs offer and will give to the children they have been caring for, and which recognises all that they have done.

The Adopters: advocating for and supporting our adopters

- **Emotional support**; reassure and support your adopters. They may have a number of worries and anxieties around whether/ when they will grow to love their children. Often adopters will be reluctant to admit when they are having a bad time. Put effort into ensuring they feel comfortable to ask for help as this will benefit all parties in the long run.

- **Practical support;** if there is distance involved ensure your adopters have somewhere to stay for introductions, consider the timing of your introductions and advocate for your adopters regarding practical and financial issues. Could VAAs help each other more when placements are made at a distance? Could the VAA local to where the child is be helpful in making suggestions about accommodation, activities, supports?
- **Prepare your families to be flexible;** Introductions will always be done at the child's pace and the adults should be expected to adapt.
- **Prepare your adopters for potential hazards;** for example, sometimes foster carers may slip up and call themselves 'mum' or 'dad'. It is important our adopters can manage these situations. CCS Adoption know that where disruptions have happened in the first 6 weeks of placements adopters often report having felt uncomfortable expressing their doubts. They therefore carry out matching risk assessments right before placements go ahead, where social workers work out, with adopters what the risks are going forward, and give adopters one last chance to change their mind.
- **Differing parenting styles between adopters;** help your adopters to consider how their own parenting styles may differ from one another's and ensure they are complementary.
- **Refer to the research;** often our adopters will want to speed up introductions to get on with building their new family. They may see children who are seemingly coping well with introductions as a sign that it is okay to do so, however the research suggests that often children will display that they are fine where they are struggling. We know that children may suppress their anxieties around introductions and this can cause problems later. Additionally, it is often adopters' instinct to cut off contact with foster carers. Encourage your adopters to read the research around introductions and transitions. Consider running a transitions workshop for your adopters to help them understand their significance and what the research is telling us.
- **Informing adopters about the experiences of birth parents;** many CVAA members have shared positive experiences of introducing birth parents and adoptive parents or telling them of their stories to help them humanise them.
- **Teach your adopters games to play with the children so introductions are memorable;** for example, a special handshake which children will remember them by. You may want to consider having a therapist present for introductions who could teach the group some playful positive moments.

Moving forward

- Could we work together to produce a common VAA expectations document in relation to transitions; one based around research, theory and practice.
- What can we learn from our experience of concurrency and especially working with concurrency carers who have been able to manage extensive birth parent contact, and in some cases return to birth families?
- Could we produce a common brochure for foster carers emphasising their importance now, and in the future, how we value their role, and how we will aim to support the child and adopters after placement?
- Can we better promote our potential to undertake direct work with children so that they are better prepared for placement and enabled to have continuity of social work or therapeutic input?
- Could we do more as VAAs to support one another and our adopters when placements are made at a distance?
- Can we collect evidence and promote the importance of totally child centred introductions, which may be longer than have been the norm, may involve pre match meetings and will likely involve post placement foster carer contact?