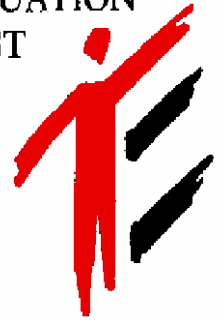




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Supporting adoptive families  
before, during and after adoption

EVALUATION  
TRUST



# **A summary of the evaluation of Adoption UK's parent support programme 'It's a Piece of Cake?'**

The Evaluation Trust  
and  
The Hadley Centre for  
Adoption and Foster Care Studies  
June 2007

*'Cake' changed everything.. It gave me the ability to stop trying to change the child and to change the way I approached the situation. (Adoptive parent)*

*I totally agree that 'Cake' can reduce placement breakdowns. (Purchaser)*

*'Cake' is a rock in your mind, to think back, and to find things that work for you. (Adoptive parent)*

*People who have done 'Cake' have better coping mechanisms and don't personalise it; they can tune in to their children and see their past hurts. (Purchaser)*

*It's made us more understanding, more knowledgeable and a lot more patient. (Adoptive parent)*

*'Cake' is a nurturing forum. (Purchaser)*

This report is a summary of the full research report<sup>1</sup>. It covers:

- The background to Adoption UK and the 'It's a Piece of Cake?' parent support programme.
- The purpose and scope of the evaluation.
- Summary of learning from the live programme evaluation.
- Summary of learning from the historic programme study.
- Conclusions and recommendations.

## Introduction: Adoption UK and the 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programme

Adoption UK is the only national charity run by and for adoptive parents, offering support before, during and after adoption. It was founded in 1971 and as of September 2007 has a membership of 5000 adopters and prospective adopters, with offices in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Some 200 local authorities are members and since 2006 it has been a registered adoption support agency in England.

All children who are adopted will have experienced some form of loss or trauma through being separated from their birth families. Many adopted children will have experienced further loss and trauma through their early experiences of abuse or neglect within the birth family, which may have been compounded by numerous moves within the public care system. For many children, this trauma may lead to emotional, behavioural, education or development difficulties, which may also affect the child's abilities to form secure attachments to their new parents. Traditional parenting techniques may not work and adoptive parents may need to develop alternative parenting strategies in their role as 'therapeutic parents' for their children adopted from the care system.

Adoption UK aims to:

- ensure that prospective adopters, adoptive parents and foster carers are as fully informed and supported as possible in the challenging, but rewarding task, of parenting or caring for children from the public care system;
- increase the number of successful adoptive placements through the provision of appropriate support services and by promoting effective parenting practice based on parents' own experiences, integrating these with current theories of trauma, attachment and child development;
- work with practitioners involved in adoption to promote the concerns and interests of adoptive families, and to develop appropriate support services in partnership with them.

### **The 'It's a Piece of Cake?' parent support programme – a brief overview**

The 'It's a Piece of Cake?' modular parent support programme (known colloquially as 'Cake') was born of an increasing need amongst adopters to meet the demands of parenting their children who experienced trauma through neglect, abuse and/or abandonment. The 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programme was developed, written and delivered by trainers who were themselves adopters, for parents who are adopters. This, and its focus on support post adoption, rather than for prospective adopters, makes it different from other parenting programmes.

The full evaluation report looks at the development of 'It's a Piece of Cake?', involving the contribution of many different adoptive parents, some of whom stayed involved with the programme and others who moved into other agencies.

Ideally parents attend the programme 12 or more months into placement of a child with them. Purchased by local authorities or adoption agencies, around 15 programmes are delivered per year with a total of 350 attendees. Since the programme started approximately 1,300 people have taken part. The programme consists of six modules, each lasting at least five hours delivered by a freelance training team of 40 trainers.

The programme aims to deliver the following specific benefits to parents:

- Enhanced parenting skills and approaches which help reduce conflicts within adoptive families.
- Affirmation of the parents' own parenting methods and an increased belief in themselves as the key resource for their children.
- Increased understanding of attachment issues created by early trauma, separation, loss, neglect and abuse.
- Increased confidence in their ability to parent children who have been affected by early trauma, separation, loss, neglect and abuse.
- Recognition of the importance of self-care.
- Support and validation to parents, enabling them to feel hopeful and positive about the future.

In order to achieve these outcomes and benefits, the trainers aim to:

- Create a safe, stress-free environment.
- Provide active listening and support to all participants.
- Facilitate an understanding of the difference between expectation and reality in adoption.
- Increase the understanding of an adopted child's imported pathology and adaptive behaviour and how this impacts upon the family.
- Explore ways of enhancing parent-child attachments.
- Explore and share new and creative parenting strategies.
- Set up an ongoing self-support network.
- Provide hope for the future.

The six modules in the programme are:

**Module 1 – Expectations, realities and loss**

The expectations of everyone involved in the adoption process, the reality of living with a hurt child and the issue of loss for parents and children.

**Module 2 – Attachment**

How healthy and unhealthy attachments develop, the legacy of dysfunctional attachment and how this affects daily life for adoptive and foster families.

**Module 3 – Claiming and belonging**

How parents can enhance the special relationship with their child and help them develop a sense of belonging.

**Module 4 – Trauma and adaptive behaviour**

Developing an understanding of the ongoing effects of trauma and how the child's behaviour is a survival mechanism.

**Module 5 – Rewiring**

Creating parenting strategies to help the child achieve better relationships.

**Module 6 – The last piece of cake**

Managing anger and the importance of self-care for parents. This allows parents to reflect on the issues covered by the programme and think about what they need in the future.

Until 2007, the programme was usually completed in eight modules. In 2005/06, considerable work was undertaken to revise the programme, the marketing material, and the training manual. The new format programmes were delivered from 2007 onwards.

Each module has a theoretical input to support the experiential and reflective learning of parents. Trainers facilitate discussion on issues generated by the theoretical concepts such

as the attachment process, the impact of trauma on the ability of to form attachments, and on brain development.

## The aims of the evaluation

Adoption UK decided in 2005 to evaluate 'It's a Piece of Cake?', working with the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at the University of Bristol<sup>ii</sup> and the Evaluation Trust<sup>iii</sup>. The work was part funded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation, Adoption UK, the Hadley Centre and the Evaluation Trust, with the latter two organisations both undertaking considerable pro bono work.

Little is currently known about the impact on adopters and adopted children of interventions such as 'It's a Piece of Cake?'. Although in the general population parenting skills programmes have been found to be very effective, particularly with young children, it remains unclear whether training is best administered in groups or individually and whether there are differences in relation to ethnicity. In general the training results in a shift in parenting, the child's behaviour modifies, as does the parent's capacity to reflect. There is now a substantial body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of these methods but little work has considered whether they are suitable for the particular needs of adoptive parents.

Previous studies examining the training of foster carers (e.g. McDonald and Turner 2005; Pithouse et al 2002) have shown that carers enjoyed the training but that it had little impact on their ability effectively to parent the child. There have been few systematic evaluations of any of the adopter training programmes, and only a few descriptive studies of individual agency's packages (Beck 1999, Swaine and Gilson 1999). More recently, two programmes for adopters have been developed based on the Webster-Stratton parenting skills programme, using a cognitive-behavioural approach<sup>iv</sup>. Whilst adopters are generally positive about such programmes, it is unclear whether they have any impact on changing behaviour or increasing skills for longer than the duration of the programme.

To address these issues, the evaluation involved two separate but linked pieces of work of three live programmes and 20 historic programmes.

## Summary of learning from the live programme evaluation

- The evaluation of three current 'It's a Piece of Cake?' support programmes by staff from the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies was intended to determine whether the programme delivered by Adoption UK was successful in delivering its training objectives.
- Of the three 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programmes selected, two were delivered using the eight-module format and one used the new six-module format.
- A pre-programme/post-programme design was used to compare measures taken before and after programme completion.
- The sample comprised 16 adopters caring for 29 adopted children who were about to start the 'It's a Piece of Cake?' training programme, and a control group of 19 adopters who had not attended the training programme caring for 32 adopted children. The group having training is referred to as the experimental group and those not having any training as the control group.
- Questionnaires were returned by 100% of the sample before training began. Two weeks after training had ended follow-up questionnaires were sent out and returned by 94% of the experimental group and 63% of the control group. One placement had disrupted in the experimental group and the questionnaire was not returned. Five months later a third questionnaire was sent but only returned by 54% of the experimental group and 47% of the control group. This illustrates the difficulty in getting adequate participation in research studies over the longer term. Only the first two questionnaires were used in the analysis. Most questionnaires were completed by adoptive mothers.

The questionnaires asked adopters for information on their demographic characteristics, their education, and their commitment to the programme. Information was also collected on the children placed with them. This included their age, ethnicity, and how long they had been in placement and the number of previous moves. Adopters were also asked to complete the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Expression of Feelings in Relationships Questionnaire (EFR), used to assess children's styles of relating to their carers. The questionnaires are described in the Full Report. Adopters were also asked to identify two child behaviours that were currently concerning them, to consider the reasons for the behaviour, the strategies they used and what happened if the strategy failed.

### **Before training**

- The majority of adopters were married and were of white ethnicity. Those in the experimental group were older than those in the control group and their adopted children had lived with them for longer.
- Sixty-nine percent of the families had two or more adopted children. A quarter of families also contained birth children.
- The adopters were a well qualified group with 49% having a social work, teaching or other relevant qualification in childcare. Those in the control group had more formal childcare qualifications than those about to start the training.
- The adopted children's ages ranged from one to 17 years of age with an average age of nine years for those in the experimental group, and seven years in the control group. Importantly, 30% of the children in the experimental group were older than ten years of age in comparison with 3% of the control group. Adolescence is known to be a particularly difficult time for children.
- Most had been legally adopted and were of white ethnicity. The children had had several foster placements before being placed for adoption.
- The children living with the experimental group adopters had more face to face contact than those in the control group and the difference between the groups was statistically significant.
- Adopters stated that they found children and young people's aggression, unpredictability and hyperactivity the most difficult behaviours or characteristics to manage. There were also reports of a wide range of difficult and distressing behaviours. Half of the children in the control group and three-fifths of the children living with the experimental group of adopters had scores in the borderline or abnormal range of the SDQ.
- The control group were more confident than the experimental group about managing these behaviours.
- Before joining the programme most adopters wanted training in managing their own emotions, dealing with violent behaviour, maintaining boundaries and discipline.

### **Comparisons before and after training**

- Adopters reported high levels of satisfaction with the training programme.
- All had enjoyed the group learning. Group discussions, particularly small group discussions, were rated as the most useful and enjoyable form of learning. Role play and skills practice were given low enjoyment ratings but high ratings for usefulness.
- Some adopters would have liked more written material to take away and topics covered in more depth.
- Many adopters had encountered difficulty in attending the training regularly, particularly all day events, because of finding appropriate childcare.
- All except one adopter thought the training had increased their skills and knowledge. Most commented that they were more aware of the need to "make time for themselves", as individuals and as couples.
- Nearly three-quarters thought they had improved their skills in managing children's behaviour. Most adopters thought that it was not one specific part of the programme but the whole package that had had an effect.
- The experimental and control group reported improvements in their quality of life over time and attributed this to improved family relationships.

- Both groups reported greater happiness, confidence and less stress. The experimental group were more likely to attribute these feelings to the effects of adoption.
- The control group had not had any training but most had sought help from other sources such as social workers and psychologists. A quarter had also found the Adoption UK message boards and support groups very helpful.
- The experimental group thought the main reason for improvement was an increased understanding of children's behaviour which had reduced parental levels of stress. Communication has also improved between husbands and wives, with partners becoming more involved in parenting.
- In the first questionnaire, the adopters often attributed difficult behaviour to children wanting to be in control and having their own way. In the follow-up, the adopters' explanations for difficult behaviour were more specific, gentler and linked to the children's early experiences of abuse and neglect. These changes were apparent in the experimental and control groups. The only adopter not able to provide any explanation for the children's difficult behaviour was in relation to the placement that disrupted.
- Before training adopters were asked what strategies they used to manage children's behaviour. Adopters in the experimental group were frequent users of time out, a firm telling off, and a few used withdrawal of affection. More of the control group used rewards and spent more time with the child to manage difficult behaviour. After training, more adopters in the experimental group were using rewards and appropriate measures, such as extra time with the child and there was a decrease in inappropriate measures like grounding and time out. Experimental group adopters also persevered for longer than the control group.
- After training the level of confidence in managing difficult behaviours had remained stable in the control group and had increased in the experimental group. The changes over time were statistically significant.
- The control group of adopters with children aged under nine years completed questions about how much they enjoyed playing with their child. Before training the experimental group played less with their children and did not enjoy it as much as the control group adopters. After training there was an increase in enjoyment and the number of hours spent playing in the experimental group but not in the control group.
- Adopters were asked to identify the development of their children using the nationally recognised set of seven dimensions first established by the Department of Health to record the quality of care and the progress of a looked after child. These are health, education, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, emotional and behavioural development and self-care. After training the experimental group identified greater difficulties in the children and young people, perhaps reflecting a greater awareness of these difficulties.
- It appeared that the training had given most of the parents in the experimental group a more coherent framework for understanding their child's behaviour, a wider repertoire of responses with more use of praise and rewards. There was an increase in the amount of fun they had playing together, a greater confidence in managing behaviour and a decrease in the stress levels reported by adopters in the experimental group.
- The confidence of the control group had generally remained stable but they were using punitive measures to control behaviour, did not persevere for as long as the experimental group adopters and expressed concern for the future. It can be concluded that the training had given most of the parents in the experimental group a more coherent framework for understanding their children's behaviour, a wider repertoires of responses with a shift away from time out and grounding techniques to boost confidence.

## Summary of learning from the historic programme study

- The historic evaluation was facilitated and undertaken by the Evaluation Trust in partnership with Adoption UK. It aimed to identify evidence of outcomes and the longer term impact of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' on parents who had attended courses since its

launch in 2000. Its intention was also to identify lessons to help improve 'It's a Piece of Cake?', to inform the development by Adoption UK of other linked support programmes and services, and to provide evidence of the benefits of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' to potential purchasers and funders.

- An indicative sample of 20 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programmes was selected from the 70 that were completed throughout the UK between 2001 and 2005. Of the potential 200 participants attending the programmes, 66 parents from 19 of the programmes completed interviews. The 66 programme participants at the time of interview were still caring at home for 38 birth children, 123 adopted children and 8 fostered children (plus some who had grown up and moved away).
- Telephone interviews with the 66 programme participants were undertaken by a combined Adoption UK and Evaluation Trust team including 12 volunteers and staff members who were given training and support. The Evaluation Trust also undertook interviews with the purchasers, individuals involved in the history of the programme or from sister agencies and 13 Adoption UK staff.

### **The 'It's a Piece of Cake?' participants in the historic sample**

- Most adopters (86%) were married or living with a partner and just over half the parents interviewed had attended the course with their spouse or partner.
- By the time of interview, the ages of the adopted and long-term fostered children living at home ranged from 1–22 years, with an average age of 10.4 years. Ninety-one percent had been living with their parents for three years or more. All but one child placed for adoption had been legally adopted. At the time of placement, 56% were aged two years or less, 22% were aged three to four, and 21% were aged five years or older.
- The adopters had received very little training before 'It's a Piece of Cake?', other than pre-adoption or foster parent training. Some had attended day or evening sessions, mainly on attachment, but these were generally seen as having limited value in terms of dealing with the issues covered by 'It's a Piece of Cake?'.
- Parents' reasons for coming on 'It's a Piece of Cake?' divided into two clear groups: 56% were already experiencing significant difficulties and graphically described the problems they were facing; and 44% saw the offer as a potentially helpful learning opportunity. The desire to attend the programme was high: 86% had strongly wanted to attend.

### **Expectations, key ingredients and strengths**

- Eighty percent of parents had definite expectations of the programme. They wanted information and better understanding of their children, to make them 'better' parents; as well as strategies for current or future management of children's behaviour.
- The expectations of 27% of parents were not fully met, either because they were experienced parents or adopters who felt that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' only repeated what they already knew, or because their situations were so difficult that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' was not enough.
- Seventy-three percent felt that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had fully met or exceeded their expectations, especially in terms of the support of the group, the skills of the programme leaders, the learning they acquired, and the impact and outcomes of their participation.
- Despite the time that had elapsed, key memories of the programme remained vivid and striking:
  - 73% recalled the intense relief of discovering that they were not alone in their experiences, and the support and friendship they received from the other parents and trainers.
  - 44% recalled the emotional impact of particular sessions that suddenly illuminated their children's problems in new ways.
  - 26% especially remembered the knowledge and understanding of attachment issues that they took away and were able to apply.
  - 21% strongly recalled and still held onto the validation of the need to care for themselves and their partners.
- Asked to describe the key strengths of 'It's a Piece of Cake?', parents mainly identified:

- the group support, acceptance, being understood and no longer being alone (48%).
  - the structure, style and content of the programme (38%).
  - the gaining of understanding of their children.
  - new coping strategies (33%);
  - the quality of the trainers and the fact that they too were adopters (32%).
- All those people involved in developing 'It's a Piece of Cake?', the Adoption UK trustees, trainers and staff voiced a deep commitment to the programme being delivered by professional trainers who were themselves adopters. They asserted that parents could hear the issues better from fellow adopters and find the content more credible; were more likely to take the learning on board; felt freer to share and recognise that they were key to their children's lives. This view was also supported by a key supportive researcher in the adoption field.
- Parents themselves had not necessarily expected their trainers to be adopters. Forty-five percent had not known this before they started 'It's a Piece of Cake?'. The sense of parents' experiences being recognised, of 'not having to explain' their children to the trainers, being understood and not denied, was very important. Even those parents who were affirming of the work of social workers did not believe those workers could have had the same insights or created the same learning environment. Three parents had some reservations about the practice of trainers sharing their own experiences (e.g. 'their own baggage'), but not the principal of involving adoptive parents as trainers.
- Eighty-nine percent of parents felt that trainers were sensitive to their situations, and saw this as a key element in the programme's success; the offering and structuring of support by trainers was noted, together with their sensitivity to individuals' readiness to disclose sensitive information within the group. In contrast, a small number of parents (seven parents (11%)) expressed some reservations about the sensitivity of trainers and helpers to their own situations. These parents perceived their own situations as different from those of the other participants. A few also felt that assumptions were made by the trainers that all adopted children were the same. These parents resented these assumptions, although with hindsight it was also acknowledged that some parents had rejected perspectives about the needs of their children at the time of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' that they later came to see as valid.
- For purchasers the key strengths of the programme were the mutual support provided within the group; the programme's emphasis on self-care; the empowerment of parents and the offering of practical strategies; and the learning and overall content, quality and organisational values of the programme.
- Having trainers who were adopters was also highlighted as a key strength by almost all purchasers. They believed this was highly significant to the delivery of positive outcomes, provided that the quality of the training could be assured.

## **The 'It's a Piece of Cake?' experience: outcomes and impacts on parents**

### **Parents' perceptions**

- When asked about the difference that taking part in 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had made to them and their families, parents talked about a complex interplay between personal learning, group impacts, internal processes and family changes that in many cases had worked iteratively to support and reinforce their confidence and ability to parent.
- Seventy-six percent (50 parents) reported a new understanding of the child's behaviour and its causes. The gaining of a conceptual framework around trauma and attachment difficulties was explicitly linked with the development of more realistic expectations of their children.
- Acquiring these new insights went hand-in-hand with improved feelings of well-being and confidence, and with feeling less stressed and alone, angry and guilty. This in turn led to new approaches and changed ways of responding to children more calmly, with less anger, more tolerance, and new strategies to manage children's behaviours.



- Eighty-nine percent of parents identified key differences 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had made to how they parented their children; However, 11% (seven parents) felt that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had made no difference or not much difference to how they parented their children, either because they had already been putting the ideas into action or expected to use the learning but had not done so yet.
- Seventy-one percent of parents noted significant changes in how they saw their children and parented them, because they now understood the children's behaviours. They explicitly identified improved understanding of their child's behaviour leading to changed ways of responding to their children, including 'stepping back' from confrontation and reacting with less anger and more tolerance.
- Forty-one percent of parents identified key benefits for them in the form of increased feelings of well being, confidence, understanding and affirmation as parents.
- Parents highlighted the benefits of self-reflection and the programme's emotional impact. When the group work highlighted shared or common experiences among parents, this resulted in a marked reduction in stress, self-blame and guilt, affirming that they were not just bad parents. 'Cake' thus created a setting for parents to gain increased confidence and a sense of strength and being in control and more able to cope because they understood the experience they were living through. Many parents reported feeling more positive about their parenting. Linked to their gain in confidence, parents felt they became less stressed, more relaxed, calmer and more patient with their children.
- For 44% (23 parents), the growth in understanding was strongly linked to discovering strategies to build attachment bonds, and managing their own reactions and their children's behaviour.
- Almost all parents experienced a marked reduction in stress, self blame and guilt when hearing in the group that their experiences were shared, and they were not just bad parents.
- Others noted that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had helped them become better advocates for their child.
- A number of parents identified that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had helped with placement stability.
- Parents were delighted to be reminded of the importance of caring for themselves and each other, and many had acted on this advice to good effect.
- 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had also resulted for many in important long-term friendships and sources of support.
- Linked to this was the importance for many parents that they attended the programme as a couple and could share the experience.
- Some parents described the programme as life changing.

### **Purchaser perceptions of the impact on parents**

- Most programme purchasers perceived beneficial outcomes of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' for adoptive parents in ways that mirror closely the perceptions of parents and other stakeholder groups. These included the value of sharing experiences and ideas with other adoptive parents; combating isolation; improving feelings of well being, confidence and reassurance; improving adopters' understanding of child's behaviour; and increasing adopters' knowledge, skills and conceptual framework.
- Purchasers saw that parents were able to move away from blaming themselves, as well as seeing an increase in adopters' self-reflection.
- Key effects on placement stability, support for families during disruption; and gaining strategies to manage children's behaviours were also perceived.
- Purchasers identified a variety of additional benefits, including the generation of interest in other forms of support, making it acceptable for more adopters to attend subsequent seminars and events.
- Purchasers thought that it indicated the authority's commitment to parents; and that it opened up Adoption UK's resources to parents.

- Most purchasers believed that some programme participants were still in contact some two to three years after the programme, which was valued.
- Some purchasers also valued the way in which 'It's a Piece of Cake?' had acted as an independent catalyst for their authority to develop its post adoption support services.

### **Other impacts**

- Other external professionals identified the benefits of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' for the purchasing agencies in enabling them to fulfil their obligations to support adopters under adoption legislation without using costly staff time. They saw the programme as providing comprehensive information about parenting hurt children that the authorities could not readily provide.
- These professionals also considered that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' provided an important opportunity for social work staff to understand and respond to the ongoing support needs of adopters.
- 'It's a Piece of Cake?' was widely viewed as having significantly increased the profile, professionalism and credibility of Adoption UK as an agency pioneering innovative support services for adopters.

### **Comments on the key features of 'It's a Piece of Cake?'**

- Eighty-nine percent of parents saw the ability of the trainers to 'tune into', and respond to, their particular needs as a key element of the programme's success.
- Parents' responses to and use of the parent manual varied quite widely. Fifty percent used the manual both during and after the programme and found it very useful. Others found it mainly useful while they were attending the programme, and a further grouping had only come to appreciate its value later, as a refresher or to share with other people.
- Parents who attended 'It's a Piece of Cake?' on their own found the manual most helpful as a way of involving and sharing learning with a missing partner. It was thought by a number of parents that the manual needed to be revised to include less abstract theory. (During the course of the evaluation, Adoption UK had already carried this out.)
- Other suggestions for additional resources included the use of videos featuring case study material or 'strategies in action', to confirm theory and aid memory, and the availability of a book-lending service. Some parents and trainers thought that the opportunity to do some pre-reading of theory would be helpful which could be through e-learning. Most commented favourably on the 'homework' given to them between sessions, particularly in encouraging couples to work together and reflect on learning.
- Most (86% of parents) felt very well supported during their attendance, and 65% were still in some form of valued contact with other parents on the programme, either informally face to face (56%), or by telephone (42%). A smaller proportion (21%) were still meeting up with fellow participants in a regular support group.
- Asked about how the current support group network could be improved or strengthened, most recognised how geography and timing made developing and maintaining support groups difficult. Nearly a quarter of parents looked for help from Adoption UK or Social Services to set up at least the initial meetings of support groups.
- The potential of ongoing support groups to link parents with professionals was widely recognised by both parents and other stakeholders, together with their importance in enabling parents to continue bringing issues and sharing strategies after 'It's a Piece of Cake?'.

### **Areas for improvement and development in the 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programme**

- Parents' suggestions for improvement are detailed in the full report. Many of the issues identified have been addressed as part of the ongoing development of the programme while the evaluation was ongoing.
- While some parents did not want social work involvement in the programme at all, others felt it was important to get the post-adoption social worker more directly engaged, if only to help arrange follow-up groups. Two external 'It's a Piece of Cake?' supporters advocated that the programme should be co-facilitated by Adoption UK trainers and the local authority team. Overall it was felt that, whether or not 'It's a Piece of Cake?'

involves social workers in delivering the programme, there needs to be a stronger link with the purchasers, to ensure ongoing support of parents.

- Other professionals from supportive external agencies identified a range of areas where they would value development, including the areas of adult attachment and secondary trauma. This need was echoed by trainers in their review. More generally, a number of different stakeholder groups highlighted the need for regular reviews of the programme and the materials, and the need to find ways of following up parents.

### **‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ programme delivery issues**

#### **The appropriateness of ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ for parents at different stages of the adoption journey**

- A key recommendation from parents and those linked to the programme was that ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ should be offered to all adopters after the first 12 months of placement, with child care support to enable both parents to attend.
- Many parents valued the variety of parents in the groups, with children of different ages, with and without birth children, and with different experiences and discovering that others ‘get through’ the different ages and stages. Some parents wanted programmes to include parents at similar life stages and a few parents found the experiences recounted by longer term parents negative.

#### **Recruitment and retention of participants**

- Some purchasers struggled to recruit parents and others were oversubscribed. Different responses were not always due to the size of the authority. It would be valuable for Adoption UK to explore and share the strategies that work for different authorities. The role of an active social worker in referring parents to the programme was clear; 60% mentioned the invitation coming from Social Services of another agency.
- A number of purchasers recognised that adopters are the best advocates for ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ and need to be used more to help with recruitment via support groups. Recruiting fathers to attend was an issue, in part due to child care difficulties. Having a male adopter deliver the training had a clear effect on the attendance of fathers.
- Purchasers definitely wanted to make ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ more accessible. Trainers and staff at Adoption UK identified the possibility of opening the programme to individuals, and developing a bursary scheme.
- The drop out rate for the programmes is clearly variable. When the number recruited by the purchasers are low, such drop outs start to affect the quality of the experience for parents. Some parents’ concern about selection for the programme focused on the need to ensure their commitment to attend.
- More generally, parents highlighted the need to ensure that both parents could attend all sessions.

#### **Blocks and barriers to participation**

- It was generally recognised that childcare provision and timing were significant barriers to participation in the programme, but it was parents who felt most strongly about the issues.
- Over half the parents identified barriers to participation, especially childcare, and those parents who identified no difficulties or barriers went on to describe the availability of childcare support from their partner (which meant their partner could not attend the support programme) or from older children, grandparents, families or occasionally the support of Social Services or Barnardo’s. The stress involved in seeking this family help was sometimes very clear.
- For a number of parents, running the programmes at weekends (which is the norm) helped. For others, the programme was held during the week, so they had to take time off work but some had sympathetic and flexible employers. For 11 families (17%) getting time off work was a problem and in three cases led to withdrawal from the support programme.

- The trainers in particular shared many of the parents' concerns about barriers to participation, especially childcare, time, travel and attendance as couples.
- Trainers also identified some additional barriers around parents' suspicions and fears about attending, being judged and material being fed back to Social Services; these concerns were expressed by some of the parents prior to attending the programme.
- Most, but not all, participants are currently recognised to be white middle class adopters. Adoption UK has no control over who is selected to attend 'It's a Piece of Cake?' by local authorities. Black, Asian and working class parents have attended the programme, but they are very much in the minority, even in areas of the country where they are strongly present.
- Through its advisory groups, the trustees and staff teams, Adoption UK is very strong in its emphasis on representation from the four countries; and at a very general level, there is concern within staff, trainers and trustees that Adoption UK is a very white organisation. In the last couple of years, the organisation has actively sought central government funding for BME/minority groups service development (admittedly unsuccessfully) and has developed specific services for minority groups. It is continuing with this area of its development.

These and other key issues are discussed in the Full Report of the Evaluation Study.

### **Programme marketing, management, communication, and quality**

- The marketing of the 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programme and of Adoption UK's wider services was identified as a key issue. Some purchasers recommended making a short DVD which parents could view in their homes. It was also suggested that existing promotional materials could be improved by including an A5 flyer with lots of quotes from ex-participants on what they got out of the programmes, as well as the content. Some others wanted to change the title of the programme and the logo.
- The purchaser pack was seen by some purchasers as out of date though the material was generally valued. A number of the interviewed purchasers had not seen purchaser packs recently. If purchasers had strong relationships with Adoption UK training staff this was not really significant, though sometimes communication difficulties were identified when staff changed.
- While a marketing worker was appointed by Adoption UK in 2004 and a promotional video is planned, the marketing of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' has historically been passive, responding to requests for information. It was recognised that there was a need to promote better the programme and its benefits.

### **Understanding programme content and delivery**

- Ten purchasers mentioned the need for more and updated information on course content to promote 'It's a Piece of Cake?' for both parents and managers. A new programme handout has been produced that describes the programme in detail, but some purchasers want more information on the programme content and delivery and hence a better understanding of the learning outcomes for parents.

### **Communication between Adoption UK and purchasers**

Purchasers noted that, however good the pack, the success of the programme partly depended on the expertise and the style of the trainer. Purchasers are informed when a trainer is appointed to their 'It's a Piece of Cake?' programme and may not have previously used or met their trainer before this point. Purchasers may therefore find it difficult to have confidence in a new trainer.

- Where relationships had been built between Adoption UK staff, trainers and purchasers, this understanding was there. Such good communication was considered particularly important if the commissioning is carried out through a consortium. For other purchasers, the feedback and longer term follow up has been very positive, though all would value more evaluative evidence.

## Quality issues

- Managing, supervising and supporting a nationwide team of training co-ordinators and a dispersed freelance training team, which mainly operates at weekends, is a difficult challenge. The training staff have improved the quality assurance system needed for 'It's a Piece of Cake?', following up participant drop out, and developing peer supervision and trainer accreditation. The team recognise that it is important to ensure evaluation paperwork is returned (mid and end reviews for purchasers; end of module review for Adoption UK) and are following up with purchasers after programmes.
- Trustees and staff also recognise that the trainers offer a great deal and have a strong commitment to the programme and the organisation.
- The trainers recognised the need for more group work skills training and that trainer supervision during a programme needs development, as sometimes trainers can feel quite isolated. It was also recognised that some trainers deliver 'It's a Piece of Cake?' when they have family problems themselves and the nature of the work requires professional supervision and support. These views are echoed by external professionals who recognise that trainers must handle very difficult situations. Recognising this, Adoption UK reviewed and improved the supervision system to provide additional supervision and counselling from external consultants. This has been agreed and endorsed by its trainers.
- All stakeholders recognise the need for ongoing evaluation.

## Costs and value of money

- The attendance at the 20 programmes ranged from five to 16 participants, and the average attendance was 9.7.
- The programmes are planned for 14 participants. If the purchaser fails to recruit sufficient attendees or drop-outs arise after initial registration, the unit cost per participant becomes higher.
- The introductory price of £2370 reflected an element of Community Fund (Lottery) funding subsidy. In 2003 this was increased to £3950, and in 2004 to £4200 and 2004/5 to £5950. There has been no price increase since 2004/5. If 12 to 14 participants are recruited – a good number which allows for withdrawals – this means six days of programme support, materials etc for £425 per participant or £71 per session per participant.
- The purchasers have to pay in addition for a venue and food – and some have offered parents travel and child care expenses.
- The purchaser interviews showed that some authorities are now starting to run their own programmes for adoptive parents to supplement bought-in talks and other programmes and support groups. It is clear that generally budgets are now very tight and this means that in 2007 fewer authorities are buying 'It's a Piece of Cake?'. While a few authorities ringfence their adoption support monies, many find themselves facing deficit budgets and hard choices.
- Some authorities are clear that in-house alternatives to 'It's a Piece of Cake?', although cheaper, will not achieve the same outcomes but feel they have no choice. For other purchasers, the benefits far outweigh the costs and 'It's a Piece of Cake?' is seen as value for money, especially in contrast to the emotional and financial cost of disruptions.
- Some purchasers are not sure whether the programme is worth the investment, despite positive feedback from parents, and need the hard evidence this evaluation provides. Adoption UK needs to recognise the position of senior managers who are budget-holders and have information targeted at these professionals. Adoption UK should have a message board for purchasers, which would allow them to see how other areas handle the recruitment and practical arrangements.
- A supportive academic working in the field of adoption noted:

*'Cake' is fantastic value for the money in the amount of adopters it reaches. Look at how many adoptions end in disruption – 33% according to Alan Ruston's research. His research tracked adoptees placed at 4 years and upwards in adoptive families – 33% disrupted, 33% were OK and intact, and a further 33% families were intact, but*

*unhappy...‘Cake’ can turn the miserable families into the category of being intact and OK. It is about expectations and loss for parents. The parents continue to perpetuate the belief that their expectations will be met by having this child/these children. Successful adoptions are when adopters accept the realities and the limitations within that reality. These adopters still do strive to improve their parenting skills, but are more realistic about the small steps children will make, rather than expecting huge leaps...The adopters need to understand attachments and how they are formed, the impact of early trauma and how hard wired the brain can be in the formative years.*

### **Parents’ perspectives on their current support needs**

- Almost three-quarters of the adopters spoke about their pressing needs for support and resources throughout the interviews, as well as in response to these questions.

### **Support programme/training needs**

- There was a low level of awareness of Adoption UK’s individual training workshops and general training programme among both parents and purchasers. There is clearly a need to promote these more effectively, and to target information at parents, purchasers and other professionals soon after participants have completed ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’.
- It must be noted, however, that the 20 programmes evaluated in the historic study were delivered *before* the development of Adoption UK’s one and two-day workshops. Since their launch in 2005, all participants in subsequent ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ programmes have been issued with details of each workshop, covering subjects such as schools and education and parenting adopted teenagers.
- A number of parents felt that their training and support needs were being met, sometimes because of good support from Social Services, but often because of their own advocacy work.
- Twenty-five (38%) parents wanted a ‘It’s a Piece of Cake?’ refresher support programme to remind them of previous learning and add new learning – this was a need identified spontaneously and not offered by the interviewer as an option. Some parents noted how it was hard to maintain the learning ‘back home’ and so reinforcement of the initial learning was needed. Some parents recognised that the participants did not need to be the same as on the first programme, but some wanted something closer to a reunion to share experiences rather than a new learning programme. Purchasers and some of the external professionals also confirmed the need for refresher training.
- Ten parents (15%) wanted a next stage or more advanced programme focusing on adolescents and their needs, contact issues, and working with education. To some extent, this needs have been met by the development of one and two-day workshops on these topics.

### **Access to post adoption support**

- Many parents felt that the top priority for Adoption UK was to support parents to get appropriate support from Social Services and other agencies, playing a strong advocacy role, a view echoed by some staff and trustees.
- The contrast between the services offered to adopters by different local authorities was very clear in parents’ answers, and was also reflected to some extent in the purchaser interviews. Some authorities appeared to be offering excellent post adoption support and access to support groups but many parents reported bad experiences of trying to access funding and support. Parents described unanswered or blocked requests for information and help, high staff turnover, a lack of practical, social work and therapeutic support, and no access to respite care, support groups and ongoing training post adoption. Other parents identified negative attitudes or poor practice in their Social Services Department that made contact and trust difficult.
- Many parents wanted access to information and professional advice, advocacy and support in approaching their post adoption support team or school, again not recognising the existing Adoption UK services. However it should be noted that at the time these participants attended their programme, Adoption UK’s current range of support was not fully developed.

- Some parents identified the work that was needed with schools, especially around training teachers and other practitioners on adoption and adoptive parenting issues.
- There was also a strong emphasis from parents on the need for Adoption UK to offer training on attachment and general adoption issues to social workers, health professionals, CAMHS and GPs and teachers and other education professionals, something similar to what Adoption UK is now doing.
- Some parents needed to access information and resources for affordable therapy; others identified the need for time off or respite support.
- Some parents identified the resources needed for their children alongside therapeutic interventions, such as mentoring and befriending services or a specialist forum for teenagers.
- There was also a strong emphasis from parents on the need for Adoption UK to offer training on attachment and general adoption issues to social workers, health professionals, and teachers and other education professionals, something that Adoption UK is now doing.
- Many of the parents' perceptions of need were echoed in the interviews with Adoption UK trustees, training team members, staff and external professionals.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Adoption UK is a strongly value-based parent-led organisation. It grew out of a self-help group of parents with an ethos of informality, spontaneity, voluntarism, equality among members, a common concern, and a shared decision to do something about it. As with all self-help groups it helped individuals by providing emotional support, exchanging information, advice and assistance, and thus reduced social isolation, built confidence and provided practical ways of meeting needs. It also developed a wider social policy and advocacy role, raising awareness about the issues that parents faced, reflecting their views and experiences as the experts, and using that knowledge to press for change.

The evaluation identified the huge value placed in Adoption UK by its key stakeholders, especially parents, its role of reflecting the voices of adopters, and its response to their needs.

Taken together, the two strands of this evaluation provide compelling evidence that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' has made an important difference to parents who have attended the programme since its launch by Adoption UK in 2000.

Key benefits for participants have been improved parental confidence, the acquisition of a more coherent framework for understanding their children's behaviour, and the ability to call on a wider repertoire of responses to manage or cope with that behaviour.

Because of the highly participatory, formative approach taken to the evaluation of 'It's a Piece of Cake?', Adoption UK has effectively been engaged in a continuous process of reflection since the evaluation work began. Much of the learning provided by feedback from parents, purchasers and other stakeholders has already been reflected in the positive changes made to the programme's staffing, structure, content and delivery over the past two years.

Despite the challenges of ever-tightening budgets and competition from other providers, it is clear that 'It's a Piece of Cake?' is valued by its existing purchasers, and will continue to be used wherever possible, so long as it remains responsive to their needs.

The evaluation has also made clear that, although continuing to improve, 'It's a Piece of Cake?' is undeniably important both for Adoption UK and the parents and purchasers it serves. Furthermore, the programme now needs to be regarded as providing the foundation for the development of a continuum of services capable of supporting parents and their adopted children as their needs change. Adoption UK has developed a range of modules

tailored to the needs of parents at different, often more difficult stages of the 'adoption journey'. Other providers too have been developing therapeutic services aimed at helping adopters to cope with the often extreme needs of their children. However, the overall picture is of inconsistent, scattered provision which parents access more by luck and persistence than as a result of any clearly signposted menu of help. In this respect the evaluation suggests that, following their attendance of 'It's a Piece of Cake?', many parents and providers remain unaware of the other services or programmes available through Adoption UK. In terms of the needs of adoptive parents, many require Adoption UK to continue to play a key advocacy and lobbying role to obtain changes in policies, practices and resource allocation.

In light of the changes that Adoption UK has already made to 'It's a Piece of Cake?' and its wider menu of services since the start of the evaluation, the full report includes detailed recommendations to Adoption UK regarding new or additional work in relation to the future development of 'It's a Piece of Cake?' and of its wider work.

The Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies and the Evaluation Trust acknowledge the generous and very open help of the adopters, programme purchasers from statutory and voluntary agencies, those advisers and former staff who developed the programme, and current staff, trainers and trustees who took part in the evaluation. We particularly want to thank the staff and volunteer interviewers at Adoption UK, who gave generously of their time and interest, in undertaking and supporting this evaluation.

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<sup>i</sup> The full report will be available on the Adoption UK website from summer 2008.

<sup>ii</sup> **The Hadley Research Centre**, as a national centre of adoption expertise based in the University of Bristol, provided a strategic, conceptual and advisory role to the evaluation work and undertook the evaluation of the 'live' programmes.

<sup>iii</sup> **The Evaluation Trust** is a registered charity capacity building organisation, which historically has worked at mainly at a regional level in the South West – but also at national and international levels – to disseminate skills and good practice in participatory evaluation and undertake evaluation work. The Trust supported and undertook the evaluation of the 20 'historic' programmes, and interviewed purchasers, trustees, staff and those involved in developing the programme.

<sup>iv</sup> Gilkes, L. and Klimes, I. 2003. Adoption and Fostering 27(1): 19-25; Pallett, C. et al 2002 Adoption and Fostering 26(1): 39-48; The development and evaluation of a parenting skills programme for adopters; Anna Freud Centre: n.d. [http://www.annafreudcentre.org/adoptive\\_parents\\_research.htm](http://www.annafreudcentre.org/adoptive_parents_research.htm)