

The Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies was established through the generous funding of the Hadley Trust. It aims to promote best practice in the field through research, practice and training.

Adopting older children

One of the major child welfare concerns is how to provide a stable family life for children whose own parents are not able to care for them. A recent study led by **Julie Selwyn** took the opportunity to follow up 130 older children for whom it had been decided – in the 1990s when the children were aged 3-11 years – that adoption was in their best interests. The team examined why some children were more easily adopted than others, and considered the support needs of the adopting families.

Ninety-six of the children were originally placed with an adoptive family, but some of these families broke down such that only 80 children were still with their adoptive parents at the time of follow-up. Of the remaining children, 34 were in long-term foster care or other permanent placement, and 16 had had numerous disruptions, with no stability of care. The children came from families with many problems. Alcoholism, substance abuse, mental health problems and learning difficulties were all prevalent. The majority of the children (90%) had experienced abuse and neglect, with 68% experiencing multiple and severe

forms of abuse. Many agencies had been involved with these families, but resources were often poorly targeted and continued for years without evaluation of success. Even when children had been identified as requiring care, delays were evident at every stage with some children waiting years before decisions were made. Delayed entry to care was a significant factor for those not adopted – the odds against being adopted almost

adopters reported being in debt as a consequence of trying to meet the child's needs. When they turned to other agencies for help, these services were described as being "too little, too late".

To improve support, adopters wanted full written background information on the child and help in understanding its significance, as well as briefing papers on managing common problems, and financial support based on the needs

The odds against being adopted double every year of delay

doubling every year of delay. Adopted children were younger at entry to care and subject to speedier decision-making. Of the 16 children who found no stable placement, most were in specialist residential or secure accommodation. Poor assessment, delayed planning and inadequate attention to their educational needs had contributed to their sad outcomes.

The strongest indicator of potential difficulties within the adoptive family was the extent of a child's problems at the time they were placed for adoption. There was no one type of family that was more successful than another, but the role of fathers in supporting adoption was underestimated by agencies. Many adopters described feeling abandoned by agencies once the adoption order had been made. A quarter of all

of the child. Long-term foster carers had views similar to those of adopters, except they complained bitterly that they were given little parental responsibility, although they had cared for the child for years, and that the care system destabilised placements by encouraging early planning of independence.

At follow-up, a third of adopters reported few problems, a third described family life as a mixture of conflicts and rewards, but for the remaining third there were many problems with few or no rewards, and behaviour difficulties escalating. However, adopted children's lives were more stable than those of children in other kinds of placements, and there was some evidence that adoption reduced the severity of problems in those children who did not have severe problems to start with.

The Hadley Centre undertakes scientifically rigorous research and evaluation designed to be of direct use to practitioners and policy makers. ■

www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/fpcw/hadley/default.shtml