

THE DISRUPTION OF ADOPTION AND PERMANENT FOSTER PLACEMENTS

A Scottish Perspective

PRACTICE BRIEFING 2: KEY THEMES IN THE DISRUPTION OF PERMANENT FOSTERING AND ADOPTION PLACEMENTS



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KEY THEMES

In our research, four key themes regarding the disruption of permanent fostering and adoption placements were found:

- i) The importance of considering the whole life-course of the child/young person
- ii) Ambiguities around the helpfulness of resilience as a concept to guide decision-making
- iii) The question of what constitutes the 'right' kind of support, and what support do children/young people and carers need?
- iv) Losing sight of the child or young person and their experiences amidst the disruption process, as well as losing sight of the strengths of the placements

I) THE IMPORTANCE OF CONSIDERING THE WHOLE LIFE-COURSE OF THE CHILD/YOUNG PERSON

This theme recognises that disruptions are not isolated events in the life of a child but are closely connected to their early life experiences and experiences within the care system. It is essential that carers/adopters and professionals understand children's pasts, are able to offer support in the present, and take time to plan and think about children and young people's futures. It appeared that the impact of early life experiences was sometimes underestimated.

This theme highlights the importance of life-story work in supporting children and young people to make sense of their family and circumstances, and of carers and professionals having the confidence to talk to children and young people about their stories. In many cases, there was a view that life-story work required specialist input, rather than being about normalising conversations

around the past and ongoing decision-making processes for children and young people. This theme also highlights the need to support children and young people to maintain important relationships, including relationships with wider family, previous carers, and significant professionals.

Additionally, we found that a worrying number of children and young people were only told days before, or on the day, about moves to a new placement. This highlights a tendency of carers and professionals to try to protect children from the impact of difficult information, rather than supporting them to understand and process it.

II) AMBIGUITIES AROUND THE HELPFULNESS OF RESILIENCE AS A CONCEPT TO GUIDE DECISION-MAKING

This theme flows from the lack of anticipation of support needs. Failing to anticipate support needs seemed to be partly connected to a view of children as resilient. Children and young people were often described as resilient when they did not show apparent signs of distress to changes in their lives or when they were seen to make progress within stable placements. Resilience was then given as a reason for not implementing psychological support, life story work or for not having strong support plans in place during the move to their new permanent placement. This seems to reflect a view of resilience as something that is, or can become, an inherent characteristic, instead of an adaptive process, which depends on developmental stage, environmental circumstances and socio-cultural context. Thus, in relation to planning new placements there appeared to be an underestimation of the impact of losing a stable and known environment and how this can trigger past patterns of coping behaviours.

III) THE QUESTION OF WHAT CONSTITUTES THE 'RIGHT' KIND OF SUPPORT, AND WHAT SUPPORT DO CHILDREN/YOUNG PEOPLE AND CARERS NEED?

This theme recognises the impact of structural barriers and pressures on supporting placements. The minutes reflected the often-complex environments professionals worked in while trying to support children and carers/adopters. High staff turnover, working across large geographical distances and navigating multi-agency work all created significant challenges to practice.

Even more notable was that while support was available, there appeared to be a mismatch between the support that was given and the support that carers/adopters and children/young people felt they needed. Prominent across cases was a call for direct mental health support for children and young people. Whilst support was often directed at carers/adopters to sustain placements, and took the form of training, supervision or input from social work and health professionals, carers/adopters often described how they struggled to apply techniques in practice or how they felt approaches were not working for them.

When placements started to struggle, there was often a call for 'specialist input,' or carers felt an urgency to get a diagnosis for children and young people. This seemed to reflect a helplessness and a growing sense that someone external was needed. Support not being available 'out-of-hours' was another difficulty carers often expressed.

IV) LOSING SIGHT OF THE CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON AND THEIR EXPERIENCES AMIDST THE DISRUPTION PROCESS, AS WELL AS LOSING SIGHT OF THE STRENGTHS OF THE PLACEMENTS

Amidst the structural barriers, system pressures and working with the emotional complexities of placement disruptions, it seemed professionals and carers/adopters often lost sight of the child or young person. Keeping the child or young person at the centre is not an easy task. We cannot, and should not, think about the needs of children and young people in isolation. The needs of young people are interconnected with the needs and histories of carers/adopters, as well as professionals. Thus, when considering needs, it is important to understand the dynamic and complex relationships of family placements and how different needs connect and can, at times, be in conflict.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

For more information or a copy of the full study, contact:

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