

# Preparation is the key

**ONCE you've made your enquiry about adoption and been accepted, your next step may well be a place on a preparation group.**

**The problem facing many agencies is getting people to hear the messages being told. Karam Radwan looks at one agency's approach to preparing their adopters.**

PREPARATION groups should give you a lot to think about. First and most importantly it should make you consider whether adoption really is for you. If the answer is yes, other areas considered will be the type of children available for adoption, the kind of issues other adopters have faced, varying forms of contact, disabilities and post adoption support.

It will also give you the chance to meet other prospective adopters and share common experiences.

One adoption service which provides a comprehensive preparation package is Families Are Best, the adoption service of the Catholic Children's Society, Nottingham, a registered adoption agency providing adoption services throughout the East Midlands.

Most children placed for adoption by the agency are of school age and/or have particular needs where the level of adoption support required is significant.

Their preparation groups consist of seven full-day modules where discussions are facilitated by the use of videos, audio tapes, 'quick thinks' and case studies.

In all modules prospective adopters can meet adopters who use their own experience to illustrate some of the issues raised.

There is plenty of homework too. 'Take Home Packs' include reading material and exercises to deepen understanding of the subjects discussed.

Unlike some agencies the Catholic Children's Society's preparation runs alongside the home study so

prospective adopters can discuss the content of each group with their assessing social worker and consider the implications for them as a family.

## Integrated approach

Families Are Best first introduced this integrated approach of assessment and preparation in 1993. This was because of the ongoing complexities of children requiring adoption placements, and the need to provide a much more comprehensive and integrated package to ensure that both applicants and the agency could recognise strengths and weaknesses in relation to potential parenting of neglected or abused children.

## What should you know at the end of preparation?

- The process of assessment and decision making.
- The process of matching, placement and adoption.
- The likely experiences and needs of children.
- Skills and capacities needed by adoptive families.

(DfES Practice Guidance 2006)

It also gives social workers a chance to learn about prospective adopters in a variety of settings and to support them through this emotional journey.

## Learning cycle

The agency uses an eclectic mix of models and finds that Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle is a useful model.

The four stages in this cycle involve:

### 1. Concrete experience

Learners bring their own life map and experiences as a starting point.

### 2. Active experimentation

Prospective adopters become engaged in input to further their knowledge, demonstrations, discussions and videos. The more engaged a person is the more likely they are to remember information given.

### 3. Reflective observation

Learners process what they already know and integrate new knowledge, thoughts and feelings.

Individuals often absorb only one or two ideas from any presentation and retain impressions of two or three other ideas.

If the given information is discussed and evaluated after the presentation the individual's ideas develop and information is claimed by the receiver and becomes part of their mindset.

### 4. Applying what has been learned

This part of the process is demonstrated in the assessment report and in presentation to the panel, but more fully when the children are in placement. This process is rather like passing your driving test and then learning to drive alone! Regular reinforcement of new ideas helps learning.

## Developing empathy

A spokesperson for Families Are Best said: "Prospective adopters know that the groups are part of the assessment and that written feedback on their participation will be given to their assessing social worker.

The theory is that a good group will encourage applicants to understand how a child is affected by their early experiences and the implications for them and their adopters.

A good group will help adopters to reflect on their lives at an emotional level. It will help them to open up emotionally and develop empathy for the child. It will encourage them to evaluate the impact on them of parenting a child with a neglectful and abusive past.

Most applicants come to adoption with a fantasy about what their adopted child will be like and how they will feel and behave in their role as parents. The reality is somewhat different and as they reflect on the impact of neglect, abuse and loss on a child, they need the help of an assessing social worker to consider the types of behaviours that they may find difficult and develop strategies to help them cope.



Throughout the assessment the worker constantly links the realities of adoptive parenting with the applicants' life experiences and, over time, the hope is that the prospective adopters' internalised child will more closely resemble the real children available for adoption.

As the group preparation continues a collective experience grows. This can be the beginning of a support group for the future when applicants have the living experience of parenting their adopted child. It is a time of much learning and also anxiety and excitement. The assessment interviews help to contain the applicants' emotional state and move it forward. This is particularly important for all applicants whose individual needs cannot be fully met exclusively through the group process."

## Emotional level

Each preparation module concentrates on one or two main themes. They follow a logical sequence with the initial focus being on the applicant and their feelings and gradually shifting to the child and their feelings.

Two to three weeks are left between each module to allow time for applicants to discuss the ideas and information presented with their partners or friends and to read the take-home pack and analyse and evaluate the material in relation to

themselves as applicants.

The assessing social worker visits during this period, to assess whether the applicants understand the information presented, and is beginning to think about the implications for any child placed with them, and for themselves as adopters.

The group process taps into the applicants' emotions and can become an emotional roller coaster. A good group process encourages applicants to move from the intellectual to the emotional level of understanding and encourages them to examine their vulnerabilities and strengths. They often go through a period of confusion with ideas, impressions and feelings floating round in an 'emotional soup'. It is important that their social worker is there to help them make sense of this and support them at this time.

The spokesperson continued: "If, during the group process, applicants become emotionally prepared to care for a child and then are forced to wait for several months for an assessment, they can experience a reaction, which is reminiscent of a miscarriage with the attendant sense of loss and anger.

Adopters often go through a grieving process, which can last for years and this feeling is likely to return strongly if their adopted child has a difficult adolescence. It is effective to begin the preparation during the 'Loss' module and reinforce this during the following home visit.

The assumption that adopters can be prepared for a child from the care system in a group without this process being part of the assessment seems unrealistic and a missed opportunity for all concerned."

The Families Are Best team have

found:

- Learning begins by concentrating on the participants' own experiences. They then need to think about what they know from their own experiences and link it to what they have just heard or observed. The next stage is for applicants to reflect on their learning and it is this stage, which is often skipped, that is crucial to the internalising of new concepts to the applicants' own life map.
- Prospective adopters may reject or not fully integrate the new information and this commonly can happen when existing parents interpret information about children from the care system in terms of their experience with birth children, not taking into account the extra layers. A social work visit following each group is designed to avoid this by encouraging applicants to reflect on the new information and expand the existing mental model developed from their own experiences.
- Group dynamics encourage adoptive applicants to explore their own experiences and situation at an emotional level and then to develop empathy with a theoretical child. This makes them receptive to discussions with their assessing social worker and enables them to contemplate the realities of adoptive parenting at a deeper emotional level, which is necessary for a successful and fulfilling family placement. The combined group preparation/home assessment process reflects this.

The spokesperson added: "We consider that this model lays the foundations for more thoroughly prepared adoptive families and safer parenting for children. The agency has a low level of placement disruption and, in our view, this is linked with the Integrated Preparation and Assessment Programme, which focuses work with adoptive applicants on the complex needs of children that are being placed for adoption today."

## Further information:

### Families Are Best

www.ccsnotts.co.uk

Families Are Best, 7 Colwick Road, West Bridgford, Nottingham, NG2 5FR  
Telephone: 0115 955 8811  
Email: enquiries@ccsnotts.co.uk