What helps birth parents and carers to build positive relationships?

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Presentation overview

- Background about the Institute
- New South Wales permanency reforms
- International evidence on relationship-building practices
- Local evidence about what children and families want
- Next steps: Action research with out-of-home care sector
Background about the Institute of Open Adoption Studies
Institute of Open Adoption Studies

The Institute - a joint venture between the University of Sydney and Barnardos Australia – is a publicly funded independent research centre set up to inform and guide good practice in the area of Open Adoption.

The purpose of the Institute is to undertake child-centred research on open adoption and permanency practice for children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC), when reunification with their family is not appropriate.
Institute Research Principles

➢ **Build** research capacity and capability within the OOHC and adoption sectors

➢ **Foster** research collaboration across relevant disciplines

➢ **Conduct** applied research to address the most pressing practice and policy issues

➢ **Develop** tools and resources to support good practice

➢ **Reflect** the voice and views of children, young people and families affected by permanent removal
NSW permanency reforms and birth family contact
Basic Permanency Assumptions

• Children have a right and need to live and develop within safe, secure, and permanent families.

• Children have a right to live with parents/caregivers whom they can love, trust, and depend upon.

• Separation for extended periods of time may result in tremendous psychological and developmental disruption.

• A child's perception and experience of time are determined by level of cognitive developmental maturity.

Source: The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center
NSW Permanent Placement Principles

1. Family preservation or restoration (keeping them in or returning them to their family)

2. Guardianship (often with kin)

3. Open adoption (for non-Aboriginal children)

4. Parental Responsibility to the Minister
Purpose of contact for children in permanent care

– To reassure child that birth family members are fine and that s/he has not been forgotten
– To validate reality; why the child was separated
– To keep links with his/her own culture and community
– To ensure child is not disconnected from their birth family
– To keep communications doors open for the future
Purpose of contact for family members and carers

For birth parents:
– That the child is all right in his/her new family
– To get realistic progress reports
– To give permission to the child to attach to new carers
– To adjust to the change of role in the life of their child

For the new family:
– To provide an opportunity to update information over time
– To help them to understand the child’s past
Mixed evidence on benefits of contact

Positives
Can help children adjust to placement, resolve grief, help them come to terms with their loss & understand their family & why they entered care, can help to maintain important relationships

Negatives
Can undermine child’s sense of security, distress if adults interact negatively, promises/gifts can lead to idealisation
Children can feel rejected if it it doesn’t happen as planned

(Source: Boyle, 2017)

Separation from carers – disruptive & damaging for infants

(Humphries & Kiraly, 2009)
The views of children and families
Views of children & young people

- Aust. survey of 1000+ children and young people in care
- Most frequent contact was with siblings (37%) – even when not living together.
- Half of respondents did not see fathers at all
- Carers viewed as more supportive of contact than caseworkers
- Respondents wanted more contact with all family members, especially siblings
- Children want to feel safe & have fun (outdoors, animals, play equipment)

"It was nice to stay in touch and I know I mean a lot to my biological mum and that seeing me makes her happy. I know she loves me" (14 year-old)

"Mum and dad used to come on access visits with me... there wasn't really any rivalry or tension" (19 year-old)

"It's cool to find out things about her, because I can then relate to ... if I have the same traits or skills" (19 year-old)

"I guess because we knew her and we had visitation with her, there wasn't much questioning, and we didn't have much of a problem with it" (15 year-old)

"He [birth father] doesn't come. I don't know why he doesn't come. Because I'd like to see his face again" (9 year-old)

"Every holiday until I was 13. And then I said I want to stop [seeing birth mother]. But I didn't stop with my brothers and sisters" (16 year-old)

"I like seeing [siblings]. Because... I get to play with them" (9 year-old)

"I wanted to know that they are doing well in life and not messing around" (16 year old)

(source: IOAS, 2017)
Birth parent experience of contact in NSW

Disempowered, misinterpreted, continue to be parent

– Want less rigid and more process-oriented and relationship-based approach

– Caseworkers & carers need skills & training:
  – to be respectful, empathic & humanistic interactions with parents;
  – To understand issues that lead to removal
  – To work in partnership with parents (in planning & decision-making)

– Want focus on relationships between parents and their children, rather than event-based contact visits and arrangements

(Ross, Cocks, Johnstone & Stoker, 2017)
Caregivers views of contact in NSW

Institute research
- Concerns about managing contact independently
- Uncertainty-lack of credible information, worried about future
- Relationship with agency - power/mistrust

Pathways of Care study
- Kin carers more positive than foster carers
- Concerns: parents’ behaviour, no show, psychological impact on child (disrupted sleep/routines, stress & travel for infants)
- Kin concerns about hostile interactions with birth parents
- Carers want casework help to arrange & facilitate contact

(Cashmore & Taylor, 2017)
Evidence-based relationship-building practices
Contact model used in adoptions from care in UK

- Caseworker facilitates an informal coffee meeting between adoptive & birth parent
- Openness about expectations, roles, fears and hopes
- Agree on script to child about ‘what the judge decided’
- Prepare birth relatives for changes relating to the child (e.g. appearance, school change)
- Help adults think through what might be awkward – how do we greet each other? Should I bring a gift?
- Talk to everyone involved about how the visit went and be prepared to review your plan

(Neil & Beek, nd. https://www.rip.org.uk/)
Icebreakers used in foster care in the USA

A casework facilitated conversation between birth parent, child and caregiver shortly after a child enters/changes a placement.

Aim to build a relationship between the birth and foster parents & exchange information about a child’s habits and needs
- Parents get to talk to the person caring for his/her child
- Child gets to see parents and carers focusing on his/her comfort, needs, and best interests
- Can reduce trauma, build adult alliances & teamwork focus

Brief (up to 45 mins); face-to-face if possible, otherwise Skype
Post-meeting individual debrief by caseworker

(Biehle & Goodman, 2012)
Keeping Contact intervention in Australia

- **Structured casework support for birth parents** before & after supervised contact visits with their child in long-term care
- Modelled on coaching & strengths-based approaches
- To increase parenting skills and ability to relate to child at visits
- **Pre-contact:** goals for visit, plan activities to meet them
- **Post-contact:** reflect on what worked well; validate feelings of grief, distress or anger, and discuss managing future visits a

(Source: Taplin et al 2015)
Family Inclusion approach - promising practice

Birth parents urge carers & caseworkers to “come alongside them”

- Be open to parents changing
- Acknowledge parents love their children
- Be sensitive to impact of removal and related processes on parents
- Involve parents in making decisions
- Listen to what parents have to say

(Source: Ross et al 2017)
Tips for making communication a priority

- Stick to agreements about communication (keep appointments & agreed phone calls) (Ross et al. 2017)

- Take advantage of technology - Face-time, Skype, group text message, or similar to encourage children’s families to stay in touch with each other (Corwin, 2012).

- Letters to parents - reassurance (child cared for, their ongoing role) & discussion stimulant (www.rip.org.uk/)

- Use respectful language about parents & non-judgmental tone of voice when talking to them (Ross et al. 2017)
Next steps: Study with children & families

- Semi-structured interviews and arts-based methods.
- Hear the perspectives of children, carers, and families
- What resources & supports shape their experience of contact?
- What casework practices help build positive relationships between adults?
- To identify existing promising practices & key challenges
Next Steps: Work with caseworkers

• Action research with out-of-home care sector
• Involve children/young people & family members with lived experience of OOHC.
• Four sites in NSW (1 metro, 1 non-metro, 2 regional)
• Trial promising practices with small groups, embed agreed practices into organisations, evaluate fidelity, launch website with evidence-based practice resources.
References


Create Score Card (2013).


Luu, B, de Rosnay, M & Wright, A C (2016). Open Adoption and Young Children’s Identity Formation. Institute of Open Adoption Studies

The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center


Thank You – any questions?

For more information about the Institute of Open Adoption Studies and to sign up for our newsletter: http://sydney.edu.au/education_social_work/IOAS
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