



Adoption Breakdowns

**The views of children returned to care following
adoption breakdown**

Reported by

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Introduction

From 2001 until April 2014, the Children's Rights Director has been a statutory role with the duty to find out and report the views of children in care, getting help from social care services, living away from home in boarding schools, residential special schools or residential further education colleges, and care leavers. Other functions have included providing advice and assistance to individual children whose rights are being breached or are at risk of being breached, and providing advice on children's rights, especially to Ofsted and to government.

The Office of the Children's Rights Director has produced very many Children's Views reports over the years. Each of these gives the views of children themselves, without leaving out anything that I, professionals, the government, or adults generally might disagree with, and without adding adult comments or other research.

There has been much national and legal change in adoption over the past year. We have previously published the views of adopted children on their experiences of being an adopted person, and of the adoption process they had gone through. This report is to complete the picture by seeking and reporting the views of some of the few children whose adoptions had broken down so that they had to return to care.

In 2013/14, we consulted 15 children and young people aged nine to 18 who had been adopted, but who were now back in care following the breakdown of their adoptions. This consultation was very small scale, and that has to be borne in mind in considering the results, but these are nevertheless the real life experiences of 15 children who have experienced adoption breakdown, and give a good start to considering the issues behind, before and after adoption breakdown.



Roger Morgan

Children's Rights Director

The consultation

In 2013/14, we consulted 15 children and young people aged nine to 18 who had been adopted, but whose adoptions had recently then broken down and they had returned to care.

We asked them to answer questions and write more widely about their experience of adoption breakdown, the reasons this had happened, and how it might have been prevented. We gave children a choice of how they preferred to respond, and the responses came in either on line, on paper, or in person through a telephone interview, as the child chose.

There were 11 girls and 4 boys. Twelve described themselves as white, one as 'other', one as Asian, and one as of mixed race. Four described themselves as having a disability. These included having Asperger's syndrome, having a learning disability, and having an abnormality of hands and feet.

Twelve of the children had been adopted from foster homes, one from a children's home, one directly from their birth family, and one was already fostered with their adoptive parents.

The children's age at the time of their adoption ranged from 2 to 12; their average age on being adopted was 5. Their adoptions had lasted from two to eleven years before they broke down, with an average of 8 years. All had now returned to care, where eight were living with foster carers, three were in children's homes, one with friends and one was living independently.

Before being adopted

We asked the children whether, looking back, they had wanted to be adopted before they were actually adopted. Nine of the 15 were able to answer this – the others said they were too young to have a view. Of the nine, four said they were not sure at the time whether or not they wanted to be adopted, three said they didn't, and two that they definitely did want to be adopted.

We then asked how much say they had been given in the decision that they were to be adopted. Seven felt able to answer this. One said they had been given a lot of say in the decision, three that they had been given hardly any say, and three that they had been given no say at all in the decision to be adopted.

The same seven children answered the question of how much choice they had been given in choosing which family was going to adopt them. Four said they had been given no choice at all about which family was going to adopt them, and two that they had been given hardly

any choice. One said they had some choice, and one that they had been given a lot of choice.

We also asked children whether they thought they had been given enough information about what adoption would mean, before it actually happened. Eight children were able to answer this question. Three said they were not given any of the information they had wanted, another three that they were not given much of the information they had wanted, and two that they had been given all the information they wanted about adoption.

Five of the nine who could remember thought the time taken before they moved in with their adoptive parents had been about right for them. Two thought they had moved too quickly, one that they had moved too slowly. One child was already living as a foster child with their adoptive parents.

We asked what help the children were given to help them get ready for adoption before they moved in with their new families. Five children described the help they had been given (we need to note that nine had said they could remember enough about the time they were adopted to answer these particular questions). The help four of those five had been given was:

- Going on outings with their adoptive parents (but they said this was not enough preparation)
- Meetings and visits
- Adoption being explained
- Shown videos of their new parents, new house and new school, plus family photo album and given support by social workers.

The fifth said they had not had any particular help, but that they *'didn't really know what to say or do, so stayed silent and let it happen'*.

Six of the nine told us what more help they think they should have been given before they moved in to their new family:

- Earlier information about their new family
- Better timing – they had gone on holiday with their new family the day after joining the family and this had not helped them to settle in
- Information about other children's experiences of adoption
- Visits before moving in
- Social care services not making mistakes about facts and timings.

Two more of the nine said the adoption had not been right for them from the start, and more help would not have changed that. One said that they were simply not matched with a suitable family for them. The other said that they were adopted too late in their childhood and they remembered too much of their past to settle in to a new family.

During the period of their adoption

Ten of the children were able to tell us about any particular help they were given to help them to settle in with their adoptive family once they had moved in. Four said there had been no particular help to settle in. Another said they had not received any particular help to settle, but had not really needed this as they were adopted with their siblings. Yet another had already been fostered with their adoptive family, so did not need any new help to settle. Three told us they had been helped by social worker visits at first. One of these had also been helped by a computer programme about adoption. One more had been given a lot of special help to settle by their new family themselves.

Two of those who had received outside help to settle in with their adoptive families after they had moved told us the problem with this had been that it only lasted a short time and then stopped. *'The social workers seemed to just disappear straight away', 'I got adopted and that was pretty much it'.*

Six children described what more help they thought they had needed to help them settle in. One said they would have been helped if their social workers had carried on visiting. Another said they should have been believed when they said they were unhappy after being adopted. One said they had needed, but not had, help from a counsellor as they grew older, to cope with the difficulties of being an adopted child. Two simply said they should have been given outside support when they had not been given any.

The child who had gone on holiday the day after moving in said that they would have been helped by better timing of the move in. *'They rushed it, they were trying to go too fast and it's not right. I was a little kid and I hate change. I still don't cope with change'.*

While they were adopted children, nine had been in contact with their birth parents (mainly by letter), eight had not. All had brothers or sisters. Three had been adopted together with at least one of their siblings. Four had no contact with any of their siblings once they had been adopted. For others, the main contact with their siblings was by visits. Nine had wanted more contact with members of their birth family, and only two thought the amount of contact was right for them.

The breakdown of their adoption

The reasons given by the children for their adoption breaking down varied. Common reasons were a breakdown in relations between child and adoptive parents (in five cases) and the child's own behaviour being difficult (in three cases). Other reasons were that the adoption had simply not worked out, difficult relations between the adopted child and one of the adoptive parents' own children, the child committing an offence, the adopted child pursuing information about their birth family, the birth of the adoptive parents' own baby, death of an adoptive parent and poor relations with the new step parent, breakdown in schooling, the adoptive parent adopting siblings but preferring the other sibling, and abuse.

Some children commented on aspects of the breakdown, such as feeling that it was blamed entirely on the child, that the adoption had started too suddenly with no settling down period, that the child had been adopted at the wrong age for them, and that the adoptive family was not the right match for the child from the start. Three said the adoption was no longer right for them, and it had been time to move on.

Nine children said there had been no outside help or support to try to prevent the adoption breaking down. Three said there had been some support, but this had been unsuccessful. One child had been taken out for discussions with a social worker. CAMHS had provided counselling for one child and their adoptive parents.

Suggestions of other help that might have prevented adoption breakdown were more support to help the parents cope, counselling both individually and together for child and adoptive parents, a social worker knowing what was happening before the breakdown, and more support to the child for their own problems. Two children said they could have helped prevent the breakdown if they had improved their own behaviour. Three said it would have been wrong to try to prevent the breakdown, as it was right for the child that the adoption should come to an end.

Seven children had no say at all over their return from adoption to care, while four said they had a lot of say in this.

Seven children had wanted their adoption to end and to return to care, five had not wanted their adoption to end. Looking back afterwards, nine thought it had been right to end the adoption, three that it had not been right that it ended.

Eleven of the fifteen who answered this question thought life was better for them now they were back in care, only two that it was worse. The best things about being back in care included being with a happy family again, and being freer to take part in normal activities of young people. There were no particular 'worst things' about being back in care that came from more than one young person, and four specifically said that nothing at all was worse back in care.

Since returning to care

Since returning to care, the number having contact with their birth parents was the same as while they were in care, but more had lost contact with siblings – the number with no contact with any of their siblings went up from four during the period of their adoption, to seven after returning to care.

Eleven of the previously adopted children still had contact with their adoptive parents. Three children found that their adoptive parents no longer had any say in their children's lives, six had 'not much say', and four had a lot of say. Nine agreed with the amount of involvement their adoptive parents now had, but five disagreed, believing they should no longer have a say now that the child had left their adoptive family.

Their views about adoption now

Ten of the children who had experienced adoption breakdown would never want another try at adoption; three would like to try again.

Seven thought adoption should be considered for all children coming into care, four that it shouldn't. For some, long term fostering would be better, and one said that if a child is settled in care and likes their life in care, one shouldn't 'move them around again' to try to get them adopted instead of staying in care.

As one put it, *'it's not right for everyone but everyone deserves a chance'*.