



The impact, value and outcomes of creative workshops (Express Yourself) for adopted children and young people aged 7-13 years

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Abstract

Coram Adoption East Midlands began running groups for adopted children and young people in 1999. In 2009 we developed a series of creative workshops to explore ways of enabling adopted children and young people aged 7-13 years to express their views and feelings in a group setting. This was our first significant creative/ participatory project with this age group.

A group of five adopted young people worked with the research and development worker to evaluate how effective the workshops had been in enabling adopted children and young people to express their feelings, the impact it has on their self confidence and self esteem as well as exploring the issues they had raised. Data was collected using mixed methods including focus groups, observations, questionnaires and creative child centred techniques. The data was analysed and compared and themes emerged about process and outcome of the workshops.

We found the workshops were effective in enabling adopted children and young people to raise adoption related feelings and issues, loss and difference were strong themes. Evaluation of the process pointed to the impact which gender, group size, age range and setting could have on the effectiveness of the workshops for individuals taking part and the importance of offering choice. The art workshop was particularly effective in creating a transitional space for children to share and process their feelings and enabled workers and volunteers to quickly access the feelings of children who were new to the group. There proved to be value in offering activities which tapped into feelings consciously and subconsciously. The drama workshop successfully engaged this wide age range and both boys and girls and developed their ability to express their views in an assertive way.

Introduction

Since 2000 Coram Adoption East Midlands, a voluntary adoption agency, has been working with adopted children and young people to develop services for them, including long term group work. Here we report on the evaluation of Express Yourself, a series of three creative workshops (writing, art and drama) aimed to enable children aged 7-13 years to express their feelings including their feelings about adoption. Five adopted young people received training in order to evaluate this project with the research and development worker. Here we will report on the effectiveness of the workshops in enabling children and young people to express their feelings as well as what we learnt about the issues that were important for the children and young people taking part.

Context

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 recognised that adopted families needed long term support. Prior to The Act, researchers and practitioners had shown how children adopted from the care system had greater difficulties than the general population and these difficulties could be persistent (Peter et al, 1999). This demonstration of the multiple needs of adoptive families (Fahlberg, 1994 and Jewett, 1995) led to the development of adoption support services outlined in the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005. The regulations called for support groups to be made available to adopted children (reg 3(4), HMSO 2005). In 2000 we carried out a consultation exercise with the children and young people adopted through our project. The messages we received from the adopted children and young people was their desire for more opportunities to meet with other adopted children and adopted adults to build a long term relationship to combat the isolation some of them had felt (Wallis, 2001).

It's a good chance for children to chat about being adopted. (Adopted young person, aged 15)

You know you're not alone. (Adopted young person, aged 13)

Up until this point group work for adopted children had predominantly been short term and therapeutic in nature (Triseliotis, 1988). The focus of our group work became providing adopted children and young people with opportunities to network, access support directly themselves and have their say about adoption and the services we provided.

The creative workshops are rooted in the principles of our practice which draws on our learning from and consultation with adopted children and young people. This is about listening to children and young people, giving them control over what is being developed, building on strengths, providing opportunities to succeed and develop, to enhance their self esteem and well being. (Wallis, 2008, Save the Children, 1999)

We had learnt from our work with adopted young people (Coram et al, 2006) how powerful art work could be in helping those who were unable or unconfident in expressing their views and feelings to do so (Wallis, 2008, p278). Common with other children who have experienced trauma in their lives some adopted children and young people grow up without the language to help them express, interpret and process their experiences (Winnicott, 1996). The idea that talking is not in itself enough is something recognised in direct work with looked after children (Lefevre, 2008).

These workshops could create a transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) where adopted children could express and maybe begin to process some of their feelings (Wilson and Ryan, 1994).

Methodology

All adopted children and young people from our adoption project, aged 7-13 years, were invited to attend 3 creative workshops. Twenty one children attended, all were current members of two of our groups – the Groovies and the Cliff Hanging Astronauts.

The research and development worker's experience of running groups for adopted children and young people made her very sensitive to the vulnerabilities of the children and the pain and anxiety which some children and young people may feel. We addressed this in a number of ways:

- Providing information about the workshops for children and parents
- Ensuring children and young people knew they had choices about their involvement
- Making sure there were additional staff to respond to issues that may arise
- Giving time at the end for the children to adjust and change their focus.

The programme for the creative workshops included a writing, art and drama workshop. All the workshop leaders were given the brief of using their medium to enable children to express the feelings and issues important to them. In the writing workshop the group worked together to create a story learning how to use objects in the room to develop the structure for a story. In the art workshop we had two exercises. 'Inside out' where children were asked to paint on the outside of a t-shirt the feelings they held on the inside which they wanted to share.

In the second exercise the children were given clay and invited to create something for the garden. We aimed to access their feelings in a conscious and a more subconscious way. In the drama based workshop, the facilitator Stickman created a collective space where children explored an emotional line (where their feelings changed as they moved across the line), they were asked to imagine themselves looking out at a scene and to draw and describe that scene. They created a seaside scene, developed from three freeze frame pictures; the last scene had to incorporate a feeling of tension. Finally they were invited to express what made them feel angry and Stickman modelled strong and confident ways of expressing angry feeling. They developed their issues into short plays.

The research questions that the evaluation addressed were:

- How effective were the workshops in enabling children and young people to express issues and feelings which are important to them, including adoption?
- What issues and feelings were expressed by children and young people taking part in this project?
- What impact did the taking part in the workshops have on children and young people's self esteem and self confidence?
- Did the children and young people find the support provided effective in developing their interest in these creative activities?

Five adopted young people received 2 days training on evaluation techniques (Save the Children, 2005). The young researchers' involvement in the evaluation focused on the development of research tools, the collection of data and reflecting on the issues and feelings that were raised during the workshops. Below are the methods developed to collect data:

- The young people were very talented in developing fun and creative activities for the beginning and end of the workshops which would elicit how the children were feeling about taking part, their familiarity with the creative activity and at the end what they had enjoyed/not enjoyed about the workshop. This included knickers (very popular), t-shirts and shoes which children could colour in and then peg on a washing line choosing a coloured peg which would indicate how they were feeling about the workshop. At the end of the workshop the researchers used a variety of methods to record what they had and had not enjoyed about the day. They wrote their positive comments on palm trees and improvements on sharks which they stuck on a desert island, they filled in traffic lights questionnaires and they shared their views in circle time.
- The workshops were recorded on a video camera by the young researchers.
- The research and development worker and one of the young researchers recorded their observations at the end of the workshops.
- At the end of the three workshops the research and development worker and the young researchers developed questionnaires which were sent out to children and parents asking their views.

This evaluation project was an exercise in developing the young people's research skills. It had been noted elsewhere that young people may naturally gravitate to the use of questionnaires (Save the Children 2005). We took a mixed method approach to enable them to experience a range of qualitative and quantitative techniques and ensure that the comparison of findings from the different sources of data would make our findings more rigorous (Tashakkori, Charles & Teddlie, 2003). With encouragement the young researchers were keen to develop creative and child friendly techniques of collecting data. Whilst we would have preferred to carry out qualitative interviews with children to have a more in-depth account of their experience we simply did not have the time to do this and so questionnaires were employed.

Findings

1. The evaluation of the project

The majority of children began the workshops feeling happy and excited one or two indicated they were nervous or unsure and this was something we were able to address and support. Through the use of questionnaires, the desert island exercise and circle time we were able to find out at the end of the workshop what they had enjoyed.

When asked what had been the best bit, some wrote something other than writing such as the trip to the park, but most had enjoyed the story writing.

"It was fun, I really enjoyed it, I learnt quite a lot".

"It was fun, brilliant. I loved the story we wrote".

"I liked making the story and seeing the author."

So whilst we were disappointed the questionnaire indicated no one felt they had written about something that mattered to them which was one of our aims, they clearly enjoyed the process of creating a story together and meeting a famous author. Although we observed a number of children dipping in and out of the workshop – they would join those out of the workshop with tales of how

the story was developing and some returned to the workshop to make a further contribution. This highlighted the difficulty of engaging such a large age range.

At the art workshop the desert island exercise revealed that half of the children enjoyed making things out of the clay, the others focused on other elements of the day like the swimming.

In the drama workshop there was circle time at the end to talk about what the children had enjoyed. Two girls said they enjoyed the play dough most, it had been apparent from the comments they wrote during the initial research exercise they were not keen on drama. A couple of children said the thing they most enjoyed had been the warm up exercises, two others commented on the importance of meeting and making friends. Most had enjoyed the plays they had created and one young person commented.

I enjoyed acting out my feelings on being adopted.

At the end of the three workshops we sent a brief questionnaire to the children and young people who had taken part and their parents. Eleven out of the 21 children replied.

Here were their comments about expressing their feelings

I didn't feel too bad about telling everyone how I felt but sometimes I didn't feel right telling people I don't really know.

We asked if they had been able to 'get feelings of [their] chest' during the workshops. Six were not sure. However one 12 year old girl wrote,

The drama one, got lots of things off my chest because we did things to sort it out.

This young person felt teachers showed little concern for her as an adopted child. Acting out her feelings had helped her to feel she was 'sorting it out', maybe doing something about it.

Drama put some children out of their comfort zone, some of the older young people did not find the art workshop very engaging and there was the general pattern of children enjoying the workshop which reflected their personal interests and this was confirmed by the parent's replies to the questionnaires. One 13 year old had commented to her mother about the plays they had made about the seaside,

I'm not really keen on drama but I enjoyed the beach bit because I love the sea.

Interestingly though, a few children had come along to activities they didn't like and we have some evidence that this could be down to the parents.

The replies from parents interestingly indicated that when children returned home from the workshops they mainly talked about taking part in activities and seeing their friends rather than any feelings raised.

2. Findings about the process of conducting creative workshops

The young researchers were excellent in creating fun and engaging ways of collecting adopted children and young people's views and feelings. The creative 'clothes exercises' carried out at the

beginning of the sessions provided an immediate message of how the children were feeling about the day as well giving important baseline data from which to assess how the day had gone. You could instantly see the children who were feeling unsure or worried. When we asked why the children had come to the workshop we learnt which ones felt it had been their parent's decision and so were prepared for the fact they may not be so engaged.

The workshops certainly helped us to get to know new children a lot quicker – we were able to see what feelings they are expressing and how they are expressing them in the workshops, and the art workshop proved particularly effective in this.

Inevitably we observed some gender differences. During the drama workshop children were asked to imagine they were sitting somewhere and looking out at a scene, they were then asked to describe and draw the scene. Most of the girls talked about the seaside, parks – they took themselves to peaceful places this was in contrast to some of the boys:

- One boy was at a taxi rank but did not have the money for the taxi. In his drawing one of his characters had lots of money, the one thousand pounds needed to go on the journey. The other character only had one pence.
- Another boy's initial response to the exercise was, 'I am sitting in a car that has just crashed'.

Whilst the art workshop seemed to open up the girls feelings a great deal, the drama workshop engaged the feelings of both sexes.

The setting did have an impact on how involved the children became. The art workshop took place in the familiarity of the project's office the children were able to opt out more if they did not want to continue with an exercise. The drama workshop was in a different venue – with no alternative activities until the play dough came out. Whilst it meant more concentration on the task this was at the expense of opportunities to opt out – which we should always structure in.

We learned that it was hard to engage such a big age range, although the age range did give children to chance to gravitate toward others of the same emotional age rather than their chronological age. There were also lessons about engagement – the more physical nature of drama did engage more of the children but other factors were present the skills and experience of the workshop leader, the setting, whether there were alternative activities available.

In the drama workshops, which was the final workshop we ended the session with an Oscar ceremony. By this point we had recognised the need to have a clear celebration of what the children had achieved and to include the parents so they were better able to share in, and talk about, the experience.

Alongside evaluating the effectiveness of the workshops in enabling children to express their feelings and views we also wanted to explore the views and feelings that emerged.

3. The issues and feelings raised by adopted children and young people taking part in the workshops.

Increasing our understanding of individual children's feelings

Over the course of the three workshops we were able to observe the dominant feelings of particular children. For example, the work of an eleven year old girl demonstrated the extremes of emotions

she felt. In the clay workshop she created a tall flower with large petals which faced up to the sky and made her feel happy in contrast she made a sticky, slimy snail which, 'just makes me feel cold'. In another exercise the girl drew her face with tears running down it and then made a play dough face that was happy and excited. This contrast in extreme feelings was a strong theme for her over a number of workshops. The workshops provided an opportunity to observe over time and in a diversity of situations the veracity of these feelings.

It also helped us to confirm feeling which we were aware of from parents but had not seen children express. One eleven year old girl played the part of an adopted child at school sitting curled up tight on a windowsill to hide from the teachers. She protested when they found her, "You don't know what I feel like!" A very graphic image of the isolation she was feeling which highlighted the work needed at school to help her feel understood and included.

Some children were also able demonstrate a need to control what they revealed. During the art activity one boy talked at much length about the [Triceratops](#) he had modelled out of clay – it had been a school topic and he was eager to demonstrate his knowledge. We were also left feeling it was a way to control the situation, finding something safe to talk about so that he did not have to reveal his feelings.

Expressing love for adoptive parents

The theme of the family was very strongly articulated in 'Inside Out' activity. Many took the opportunity to express their love for their adoptive parents on their t-shirts. This theme was also observed when this activity was conducted with a group of 15-19 year old adopted young people at a summer camp.

Managing loss

The clay work was particularly affective for enabling some children to express feelings of loss. One nine year old girl modelled her clay into in to the shape of a flower, when she spoke to camera she described how the previous summer she had grown beautiful flowers but they had died in a cold spell. Now she had made herself a flower that would never die she appeared very pleased with herself when it was recognised how she had been clever in making a flower that would last forever. As adoption workers we are conscious that children may relive loss but had never anticipated this would happen through the growing of flowers (Brodzinsky and Schechter, (1993); Keck and Kupecky, 1995). The clay became an opportunity for her to exercise some control over her experience. As with many of the children who took part in these workshops, she demonstrated resilience and the ability to process feelings and issues that affected her.

Demonstrating resilience

Again we were impressed with how children would use the clay to express and deal with concerns they may be experiencing during the session. One girl who was nervous about swimming, the activity planned for later in the day, made herself a mermaid. The mermaid would, "help me to swim. When [the mermaid] is hard I can take it with me [to the pool]." Without the mermaid she felt she would be compelled to get out of the pool. She had created her own transitional object (Winnicott, 71) and used to manage her concerns about swimming and at the same time made the depth of her concerns apparent to us. Again something we praised and helped her to feel very proud of.

Managing difference

A nine year old girl painted a t-shirt about her different feelings about adoption. She had used different colours to represent those feelings. They included yellow for happy, bright green for hyper and also red for sad. On the back of the t-shirt at the bottom she painted two sets of eyes and mouth. Above the dark blue eyes she painted 'ME' and above the golden coloured eyes she painted MUM. She clarified, "they are mum now eyes". She described how one of her friends had said, "None of your family except your brother have got the same coloured eyes as you. I said 'SO WHAT!'" She went on to rationalise that her birth father had the same colour eyes as her but not her birth mother. We were able to reflect back and confirm that feeling of 'so what!' she had expressed on the part of the t-shirt which was as she described, "just about difference".

Adoption and school

One of the issues that emerged in the drama workshop was how it felt to be adopted at school. The children were invited to talk about what made them angry. Stickman offered his own experience of being bullied and they began to share experiences of their school which they developed into two short plays. Two themes emerged. First adopted children could be isolated at school and feel different from others who did not understand them. Addressing teachers during one play the adopted child shouted.

You don't know what I feel like!

Second, teachers did not understand them or protect them from bullying and therefore did not care about them as adopted children. In another play an adopted child explained to a teacher,

You don't really care about us being bullied for being adopted. You just tell us to ignore them. You should do something about it now. It's been going on every year, every day, and every month. Why don't you care for us?

Thomas et al found that one third of the adopted children they interviewed had been bullied about adoption (Thomas et al 1999). In the DVD 'Adopted young people: Our Messages' (Coram, et al 2006) one of their top ten tips included

Teachers and pupils need to be taught more about adoption. If you can't rely on your teachers – who can you rely on?

At the end of both short plays these issues were not resolved. The teacher continued to say they would sort out the bullying later, in the other the teacher doesn't complete the task of organising the trip to Disneyland to cheer up the adopted child who felt isolated and misunderstood at school – she simply faints when she finds out the cost. This is akin to the findings of research on Narrative Story Stem Techniques, where children are given the beginning of a story and asked to complete it, the research found that children without secure attachments and or insufficient experience of safety showed violent problem resolution or tangential responses to problems (Page, 2001).

Implications for practice

We certainly aim to continue to offer **Express Yourself** workshops and our learning so far will shape their future development. This includes:

- Ensuring children have a real choice about opting in and out of the activities during the workshop. This is crucial in engaging children in a way that does not overwhelm them.
- Maximising the opportunities for children to express themselves through this direct work by limiting the size of the group. At one session we had a record sixteen children attend. This was the result of integrating the art workshop into a regular group session, in part this normalised the creative work, for some it perhaps made it more appealing but at the same time it may make the creative work less fruitful. The numbers attending needs to be limited to 8 and there needs to be a quiet setting for children to have one-to-one time to share their work.
- Altering the age range, 7-13 was just too big. We feel the age ranges of the established groups – 7-10 and 11-13 will be more effective.
- Looking into ways of sharing with parents the messages that children and young people raise in a ways that does not breach their confidentiality.
- Building in a celebration element to the workshop, to which parent are invited to boost the children's self esteem (we know how important this is from our existing practice) and give parents a way in to sharing the experience with their children.
- Offering activities during the workshops which tap into feelings in conscious (what makes you angry, paint a feeling on a t-shirt) and unconscious ways (draw me a scene, create something for the garden).

The products of the workshop can be developed further. Having videoed their plays about school we will be able to return to them with the adopted children and explore how to resolve the issues raised in the stories. Similarly the story created in the writing workshop is something that we may be able to share with other adopted young people to help explore their feelings about rejection, sense of self and difference, a grown up version of Nutmeg. Nutmeg is a series of story books which were created for young children to help them understand adoption (Foxon, 2001). In essence the workshops may be the beginning of adopted children and young people helping to create tools to help others share their feelings on adoption.

We must also recognise the importance of providing an opportunity for adopted children to express their love for their adoptive parents. In the context of adoption, families may be dealing with lots of issues, feelings and behaviours where feelings of love may get buried. Adopted children and young people were using the t-shirts and the comments box to communicate their feelings of love directly to their adoptive parents a process we need to recognise and encourage.

Conclusions

Evidence from the evaluation of the workshops has shown how effective well designed creative activities in a group work setting can be in accessing the feelings and views of adopted children in this age group. Themes of loss and difference were prominent and there were clear benefits in sharing these feelings with others who were adopted. Taking part the workshops empowered some young people, helping them to feel they were addressing the issues they faced and at the same time promoting their resilience. Our findings have encouraged us to incorporate these creative tools into our regular group work. We have also identified the potential for adopted children and young people to create tools to enable others to express their views and feelings and this is something we want to build on.

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