

For ASART website

Early therapeutic support is key to placement success

In February, a Government policy change made it mandatory for councils to tell prospective adopters about their entitlement to adoption support.

This is a welcome change to the unhelpful policies that have hindered many adopters. It will sit alongside similar policy changes from previous months that aim to enable adopters to access support that is relevant to them, at a time when they actually need it, as well as a budget to help pay for this.

These changes may make a difference in the number of successful placements, and bring long-awaited relief to hundreds of current and prospective adopters, who face unimaginable struggles in silence.

What makes their plight all the more desperate is that it is adoptive parents, not social workers, who are living directly with their children's traumas and the many ways – some violent and harmful - in which they express their emotions. Who better to know what kind of support they actually need to help their children, and so begin the process of attachment?

This is particularly the case with older children - ironically, the children that many agencies and local authorities are most keen to place.

Previous barriers to placements, such as ethnicity policies, have been revised to remove unnecessary delays. What is not always taken into consideration, however, is the greater need these children may have for some early therapeutic support to help them make sense of, and resolve, deep-rooted issues that could prevent successful attachment. Again, it is primarily the parents of these children who will know what a difference the right type of support, brought in at the right time, can make.

Sadly, these changes are too late for many prospective and current adoptive families who have suffered breakdowns in their relationships, marriages and/or placement. Moreover, many of these parents were often in desperate need of therapy themselves, as they faced daily battles with their self-esteem, confidence, and general emotional well-being.

Where families have reached this position, and have little or no access to the proper support, it is not uncommon to find one or both parents experiencing signs of depression and other mental health issues. At worst, when a parent has truly reached rock bottom, it may even lead to attempts at suicide.

It is a sad indictment of our adoption system that there is little statistical data that can accurately connect the lack of appropriate and timely support for adoptive families to such devastating consequences. However, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence, and one has only to trawl through forums such as those of Adoption UK to know how real these issues are for adopters.

My husband and I were among the unlucky ones. We were acutely aware of the need for therapy for our eldest son who, at the age of 7, had already endured more than his fair share of rejection and trauma, which manifested in aggressive behaviours both in and out of home within weeks of placement.

Things began to take their toll on us as new parents. From being two upbeat, positive and energetic individuals we gradually became wary of ourselves, which in turn led to loss of confidence in our parenting abilities.

Despite all our requests for child therapy - ironically following the advice we received from other professionals including the children's own doctor – our local authority felt it was “too soon” for this and all our boys needed was love.

They did, however, agree to provide parental therapy in the form of weekly 50 minute sessions (one a week) with a professional, who was so heavily booked up it was 5 weeks before our first meeting. The sessions only scratched the surface of our problems as the core issues were not with entirely with us, but with our eldest.

In time, despite the fact that our youngest son was bonding, the situation with our eldest deteriorated to the extent that we simply could not go on without appropriate support. Our placement ended in disruption, and the entire process left us utterly desperate and disconsolate – especially when we learned at the disruption meeting that the professional we had been seeing had actually offered to work with us as a family ... and that this offer was deliberately withheld from us by the local authority.

Though we suffered a dreadful lack of support when it was most needed during placement, nothing could have prepared us for shocking discovery that there is practically no support at all for adopters at rock bottom who have lost their children and are grieving in the worst possible way.

Though local authorities and agencies have a duty of care to provide post-disruption counselling, in reality we do not believe this serves the best interests of those grieving parents. It was through our own research, and with some direction from PAC, that we found ASART, which led us to the much-needed counselling we received that helped us come to terms with our loss and to get back to something like our former selves.

Prospective and current adopters are frequently reminded of the need to take care of themselves, and in the majority of cases this care involves therapeutic support from various sources. The policy changes that have come into force recently are undoubtedly the right way forward, but whilst we applaud them we do so cautiously. Adoption may not be right for everyone, but without the right kind of help and support – and accessibility to these - it can go wrong for anyone.

By
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