

BOOK REVIEWS

Contact in adoption and permanent foster care Research, theory and practice

Elsbeth Neil and David Howe (eds)

British Association for Adoption and Fostering

London, 2004

Contact in adoption and permanent foster care: Research, theory and practice is another of the excellent anthologies on specific topics from the British Association for Adoption and Fostering.

Each chapter in this volume provides a description and discussion of a recent research project on various aspects of contact in adoption and foster care. An excellent section at the end of each chapter summarises the project in terms of its aims, findings and implications for practice. There is a list of references attached to each chapter – however, while this is helpful when reading the chapter, I believe that the references would be better placed in an overall list at the back of the book.

Most chapters describe research undertaken in the UK, with two chapters covering US research. As there has been little published research in Australia on contact, there is no information on Australia – and New Zealand is mentioned only in passing in the Introduction. As both countries have pioneered openness in adoption and other long term placements, the fact that there is no significant research to be included in such an anthology is a wake up call to all of us who are conducting research in this area.

Contact in adoption and permanent foster care covers research on both direct (face to face) and indirect (eg, ‘letterbox’) contact. This is not consistent with the Australian or New Zealand context, as our understanding of ‘contact’ is less likely to include indirect contact, due to the culture of openness which has developed over the past two decades.

The cumulative findings of these research studies contain few surprises for practitioners and researchers alike. For example, many of the projects have found that:

- Contact works best when the birth and permanent families feel involved in the process and work in partnership for the benefit of the child;
- Contact (how often, where and in what circumstances) needs to be decided on a case by case basis (and should allow for changes over time), rather than be decided according to a formula;

- Ongoing support for the child, the birth family and the permanent family is essential in contact arrangements.

All of these findings are pertinent to current debates in the Australian context and some are crucial. For example:

1. Contact with birth relatives is not always positive and ‘children who have suffered severe maltreatment may be re-traumatised when they have contact with the maltreating parent’ (p. 220). This is particularly challenging for Australian practice where contact is, by and large, considered to be a ‘given’ by both child welfare and legal professionals. The main issue to be considered here is how child welfare organisations and Courts can best work together to protect children’s physical and psychological safety, at the same time recognising that contact with birth family provides most children with at least some degree of positive identity.
2. Unsupervised contact can be dangerous – eg, Selwyn (2004) found that ‘whilst they were in the care system and in adoptive/long-term foster placements, 21 per cent of the children were physically and/or sexually abused during unsupervised contact’ (p. 163). With diminishing resources for supervision of post-legalisation contact, many professionals are concerned that children are sometimes placed in potentially abusive and unsafe situations without adequate supervision.
3. Post placement support (including post legalisation support) – for ongoing contact arrangements, as well as in a broader sense for identity and behavioural issues related to prior neglect and abuse – continues to be undervalued and underfunded. This is incredibly short sighted when the alternative care system increasingly depends on private families to care for children in the child protection system.

Contact in adoption and permanent foster care: Research, theory and practice raises these and many other topical issues. It is recommended reading.

Reviewed by:

Dr Cas O’Neill