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Citation for final published version:

Blackmore, Jenny, Burns, Gemma, Waters, Cerith S. and Shelton, Katherine H. 2020. 'The very first thing that connected us to him': adopters' experiences of sharing photographs, 'talking' albums and other materials with their children prior to meeting. Adoption and Fostering 44 (3) , pp. 225-241. 10.1177/0308575920945174

Publishers page: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0308575920945174

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Adopters' experiences of sharing photographs, 'talking albums' and other materials with their children prior to meeting

'The very first thing that connected us to him.'

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Abstract

Prospective adopters commonly share materials such as photographs of their family, 'talking albums', DVDs, toys and blankets with their child prior to meeting them. This is often the first point of 'introduction' of the adoptive family to their child. The sharing of materials is also one of the earliest tasks in which foster carers and prospective adopters work together. This study investigates adopters' experiences of sharing materials in the wider context of working with foster carers during the process of 'introductions' with their child. Thematic analysis of 24 interviews conducted with adoptive parents revealed three main themes: collaboration, familiarisation and connection. Further qualitative and quantitative data were subsequently gathered and analysed from surveys completed by 64 adoptive parents. Findings highlight the central role of the foster carer in preparing a child for a move to adoption, and the potential impact that the grief and loss experienced by a foster carer may

have on this move. Findings also suggest that the sharing of materials could be an early indicator of a foster carer's capacity to support a child's transition to life with their adoptive family. Adopters' perceptions of the impact of the materials, both at the time of introductions and their on-going significance several years post-placement, are explored.

Keywords
Adoption, adopters' experiences, transition, introductions, foster carer, grief, loss, 'talking albums', photographs, DVDs, toys, blankets

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Funding:

The first author is supported by a studentship funded by the Wales School for Social Care Research (grant number: TBC)

Introduction

Recent research and discussion in the adoption sector has focused attention on the significance of a child's transition from foster care to adoption (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014; Browning, 2015; Neil, Young and Hartley, 2018; Neil, Beek and Schofield, 2018; Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa, 2015a; Lewis, 2018). Problematic introductions have been associated with more challenges being experienced in the child's placement (Neil, Young and Hartley 2018: 72) and in the extreme, problematic introductions, including a lack of support

for the prospective adopter from the foster carer, have been found to be associated with the later break down of the child's placement (Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa 2015: 100).

This study explores the experiences of foster carers and adopters cooperating to support a child prior to moving to their new home. Specifically, this task includes the sharing, by foster carers, of photographic, audio and other materials that the prospective adopter has provided for their child. Such materials are usually shared before formal introductions between a child and their would-be adopters commence. We focus on adopters' experiences of support from foster carers during introductions to their child and consider adopters' perceptions of the impact of the use of materials, both at the time of the introductions, and also approximately four years after the child had moved in with their adoptive family.

Practice guides and research studies have highlighted the central role of foster carers in helping to prepare a child for a move to their adoptive family. The dynamic between foster carers and prospective adopters can be pivotal to the success or otherwise of a child's adoptive placement (Dunbar, 2009; Byrne, 2000; Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa, 2015; Browning, 2015; Lewis, 2018; Neil, Young and Hartley 2018; Neil, Beek and Schofield, 2018). Dunbar goes so far as to state that '*A smooth transition is rarely achieved if the two sets of carers do not approve of each other.*' She continues, *'disapproval may be open or covert – either way, it can undermine a placement and damage the child'* (Dunbar, 2009: 23).

Psychotherapists Boswell and Cudmore emphasise the importance of foster carers and adopters not merely 'getting on' with each other during transitions, but also being able to work together to remain focused on the child's feelings throughout the process. The *'emotionally complex task to hold in mind the loss of a meaningful relationship while nurturing a new one'* is often over-looked by adults, they write, as adults often become focused on their own feelings during the child's transition. Inadvertently, foster carers and

adopters may have a 'blind spot' to the child's experience of significant losses, particularly of their foster carer (Boswell and Cudmore, 2017). The authors question whether a child's *'smooth'* transition from their foster carer to their adoptive family, alluded to by Dunbar, can ever be achieved – or indeed whether this would be a 'desirable' outcome. *'Smooth'*, they write, is frequently used to describe a move in which a child has shown few outward signs of distress. Often, this may include pre-verbal children or other children who may not have the capacity or vocabulary to put their feelings into words, placing them at enhanced risk of future maladjustment. *** [[The authors observe that whilst losing a parent figure in childhood at whatever age it happens is traumatic, this is particularly the case for the first 3-4 years of life, referencing the work of Bowlby, Winnicott, Rutter and Brier to support this claim. (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014).]] IS THIS TOO MUCH ON THIS? ***

In their study of adoptions which had disrupted or were at risk of disruption, Selwyn and colleagues found that just under one-third (30%) of foster carers were thought by adopters to have behaved in ways which had hindered 'introductions' and their child's transition to adoption. Some adverse factors identified by Selwyn et al. affecting transitions and subsequent outcomes for children echo Boswell and Cudmore's assertion that emotions experienced by adults can take prominence during children's transitions. For example, Selwyn and colleagues describe problematic introductions involving foster carers who had difficulty letting go of the child, perhaps because they had wanted to adopt the child themselves, or because they were inexperienced, or struggling with their own feelings of grief and loss. Some carers were perceived not to have given children *'psychological permission'* to move on (Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa, 2015: 90).

Boswell and Cudmore (2014), Neil, Beek and Schofield, (2018) and Browning (2015) all propose that the quality of a child's transition from foster care to their adoptive placement is contingent both upon the development of a constructive relationship between families, as

well as the capacities of adults involved to remain focused on the child's emotional needs. Browning characterises the sets of carers as 'structural pylons' that hold a 'bridge' between them in place. He stresses that the child's movement across this symbolic bridge will not be a linear one; she will move back and forth, physically and emotionally, as she approaches the new family. In the earliest stages of a child's move across the 'bridge' that Browning (2015) alludes to, materials such as photographs and audio recordings that adopters have provided of themselves are usually shared with the child. This appears to have been established practice in the UK for several decades. Writing in the 1990's, Vera Fahlberg indicates that the practice of sharing photographs stemmed from a desire to introduce a specific would-be family to a child visually, prior to meeting, to reassure the child about their forthcoming move. Fahlberg attributes the task of sharing the images with the child primarily to the worker, who should use them as a prompt for discussion, and in doing so *'needs to listen for fears, worries or concerns that the child might express '* (Fahlberg, 1994: 209).

More recently, authors including Dunbar (2009) and Nicholls (2005) have discussed the sharing of materials with a child as primarily the role of the foster carer. They note that the task includes sharing information about the new family, using visual imagery to prompt discussion, perhaps in the form of a DVD, photographs or books and even placemats for use at mealtimes. Schofield and Beek (2006) also advocate providing materials for a child prior to meeting their would-be adopter, suggesting that this will ease the transition for the child and help them develop a sense of continuity and a greater understanding of what will be new and different in their new home.

In contrast, psychotherapists Burnell, Castell and Cousins (2009) suggest that information shared with a child in advance of being placed with their prospective parents should be minimised, to reduce children's anxieties about their move, as part of a 'low key' approach that they advocate during early meetings between children and their prospective

adopters. This advocacy of minimised information-sharing with a child prior to meeting appears to be a minority viewpoint in the literature, but there is limited data to substantiate or contradict it.

Research is lacking on the experiences of children themselves of transitions in general (Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa, 2015) or specifically of their experiences of receiving photographic and other materials from their adoptive family prior to meeting them. Rare exceptions include *Adopted Children Speaking* (Thomas, Beckford, Lowe and Murch, 1999) based on interviews with 41 children who had been adopted at the age of five or older, and *About Adoption: A children's views report* (Morgan, 2006). Morgan's report was based on the views of 208 children and young people aged 6-22, who were sent out 'question cards' which sought to explore their experiences of adoption.

Thomas and colleagues found that children generally reported appreciating receiving materials from and about their prospective parents in advance of placement. For example, children reported that it was good to see what their family looked like; that the items were judged to be *'really good'* and *'helpful'* (Thomas et al., 1999: 45). In Morgan's report, children's suggestions for the '5 best ways of getting to know their adoptive family' included being given a video or book about their new family (Morgan, 2006: 23). Whether there was a DVD or story book about the new family was also in children's top ten list of things they wanted to know about their would-be families.

Overall, there continues to be a dearth of information about how adopters experience the period of transition of their child into adoption (Lewis, 2018), including in-depth accounts of adopters' experiences of collaborating with their child's foster carer to support the move, and specifically their experiences of sharing materials with their child, prior to meeting. A fuller understanding of the experiences of adopters during their child's transition to their

family is required to inform social work practice. This study draws on findings from a national study of a cohort of adoptive parents whose children were placed for adoption between 01 July 2014 and 31 July 2015. We consider adopters' perceptions and experiences of the use of visual, audio and other materials that they provided for their child prior to meeting them and contextualise these experiences in relation to adopters' perceptions of support received from their child's foster carer during subsequent introductions to their adoptive child.

Method and sample

This study draws upon information from the Wales Adoption Cohort Study, which has a sequential, mixed-methods design. The overarching aim of the study is to develop a better understanding of the early support needs and experiences of newly formed adoptive families. Further information about the research design is described in other publications (e.g. Meakings, Coffey and Shelton, 2017).

Data sources for the present study

(1) In-depth interviews with adoptive parents (9 months post-placement, N=40). Of these, three parents had previously been their child's foster carer and were removed for the present study (N= 37). The semi-structured interview format included a section on the child's introductions to their adoptive family, questions about the adopters' experiences of the helpfulness of the foster carer during the introductions, and of the work that was undertaken with their child to prepare them to move to their adoptive home. Twenty-nine interviews elicited information about the work that had been undertaken with their child to prepare them for their move to their adoptive home. Of these, interviews which included reference specifically to materials that the adopter had shared with their child prior to meeting them were selected to create a sub-sample

for the present study (N=24). The sharing of materials emerged from the interviews and was not asked explicitly by the research team. Therefore, it is impossible to ascertain whether the materials were shared or not in the thirteen interviews in which materials were not discussed.

(2) Questionnaires to adoptive families (Wave 4, approximately four years post placement, N=68, 71% retention from our original sample). Of these, four respondents had previously been their child's foster carer and were removed for the purposes of this study, N=64). Questions were developed to elicit qualitative and quantitative data relating to adopters' experiences of the materials that they had provided for their child before meeting them.

The table below shows the key characteristics of the adoptive families who contributed to this study.

Table 1. Key characteristics of the families in the questionnaire and interview samples.

	Questionnaire Sample *(N=64)*		***Interview Sample*** *(N=24)*	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Adopter status				
Heterosexual couple	52	81.3	18	75
Same sex couple	4	6.3	2	8.3
Single adopter	8	12.5	4	16.7
Child gender				
Male	32	50	13	54.2
Female	32	50	11	45.8
Age of child when placed for adoption				
Under 12 months	15	23.4	2	8.3
12-47 months	30	46.9	14	58.3
48 months+	19	29.7	8	33.3
Sibling group placement				
No	46	71.9	16	66.7
Yes	18	28.1	8	33.4

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and these, together with the open-ended responses in the Wave 4 questionnaires, were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved the first author familiarising herself with the data, by reading and re-reading transcripts; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing the themes and then defining and naming them before writing the report commenced. Names have been changed to protect participant anonymity.

Findings

The nature and extent of the use of materials shared and their perceived 'usefulness'

The twenty-four interviewees who referred to materials that they had provided for their adoptive child prior to meeting them described a range of items. These included

laminated photographs, 'talking' photo albums with audio recordings of their voices (such as Tomy or the Lamaze butterfly book), DVDs, blankets and clothing which the adoptive parents had transferred smells from their home to, by sleeping with or washing, for example. Several adopters had given their child a soft toy together with a photographic album featuring the toy in the adoptive family home. Subjects in the photographic albums had included the adoptive parents themselves, other children in their family, pets, the child's new bedroom and home, including specific features such as the front door, or the swing in the back garden, and the adopters' vehicles. One DVD had shown the adopter reading bedtime stories.

We wanted to glean a fuller picture of the nature and extent of the practice of adopters sharing materials with their child prior to meeting, and their perceptions of the usefulness of those materials. We asked questions to elicit this information in our follow-up questionnaire, completed by adoptive parents approximately 4 years after their children had come to live with them. The results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. The nature of materials provided by adopters for their child, prior to introductions.

Materials provided by adopter	*Number of adopters providing materials (N=64)*	
	Frequency	*Percent*
photos/books	62	96.9
film	24	37.5
audio recording	31	48.4
toys	48	75.0
other e.g. blanket	8	12.5

Almost all adopters (N=62, 96.9%) had provided their child with photographic materials prior to meeting them, whilst three-quarters (N=48, 75%) had given a toy. Just over one third (N=24, 37.5%) had provided moving images, whilst almost half (N=31, 48.4%) had provided an audio recording of some kind, such as a 'talking album'.

Respondents were given an 'other' option (N=8, 12.5%) and seven adopters specified that they had given their child a blanket or clothing that they had slept with.

Table 3. Adopters' perceptions of the usefulness of materials that they had provided for their child, prior to introductions.

	Very useful	*Useful*	*Not useful*	*Missing*
photos/book	N=44 (71.0%)	N=11 (17.7%)	N=5 (8.3%)	N=2 (3.2%)
film	N=15 (62.5%)	N=6 (25.0%)	N=1 (4.5%)	N=2 (8.3%)
audio recording	N=19 (61.3%)	N=8 (25.8%)	N=1 (3.2%)	N=3 (9.7%)
toys	N=24 (50.0%)	N=14 (29.2%)	N=7 (15.6%)	N=3 (6.3%)
other	N=2 (25%)	N=4 (50.0%)	N=0 (0.0%)	N=2 (25.0%)

Most adopters had found materials that they had provided for their child prior to introductions starting to have been 'very useful' or 'useful'. Five adopters who said that they had found the photographs and /or voice recordings that they had provided for their child to be 'not useful' added comments stating that they felt that their child was too young to benefit from such materials. Three adopters who had provided a toy but found this 'not useful' noted that the toy had not been shared with their child.

Key themes: collaboration, familiarisation and connection

We were interested in examining adopters' experiences of how materials had been shared, within the broader context of adopters' experiences of support from the foster carer during introductions to their child. We were also interested in understanding more about adopters' perceptions of the ways in which materials had been useful in supporting their child's transition to their adoptive family. Analysis of our data revealed three master themes:

collaboration; adopters' experiences of support from foster carers prior to and during introductions, **familiarisation**; adopters' views of the ways in which materials had helped familiarise their children with their adoptive families, and **connection**; the perceived psychological impact on the child and their adoptive parent of the materials shared, and the extent to which this was perceived by parents to help them forge a relationship with their child.

Collaboration

Findings relating to this theme included adopters' perceptions of the foster carer's role in sharing materials that they had provided for their child prior to introductions starting, and their experiences of the support received from their child's foster carer during introductions more generally. Findings reflect adopters' perceptions of the dynamic between them and their child's carer, and particularly the impact that they perceived foster carers' emotions to have had on introductions with their children.

Whilst social workers sometimes also played a role, adopters most frequently indicated that their child's foster carer had taken primary (sometimes exclusive) responsibility in helping their child prepare for their move to their adoptive family, particularly relating to sharing materials that they had provided. For example, when asked whether her son's social worker had done anything to help prepare him for the move, Sally replied:

I would be surprised, but Nana Jackie [foster carer] was on the ball.

Nineteen (79%) of the twenty-four adopters we interviewed indicated that their child's foster carer had appropriately utilised the materials that they had provided for their child, in advance of their transition to their adoptive home. Four of the adopters interviewed indicated that materials they had provided had not been utilised or had not been used appropriately by

the foster carer, whilst one further adopter did not indicate whether the materials had been utilised by the foster carer or not. Eight adopters who had responded to the questionnaire survey (N=64, 12.5%) also commented that their child's foster carer had not used the materials they had provided for their child, or had not used them correctly:

The toy we had slept with for a week was 'taken' by another child and was not used by our adoptive son.

Whilst findings from the questionnaire responses indicated that adoption social workers or the adopters themselves had most frequently been responsible for initiating the sharing of materials, Sarah was one of several interviewees who described how Kitty, an experienced foster carer, had not only been key in utilising materials, she had also instigated them:
she asked us to take photographs of ourselves and then got them laminated and she done this with other kids of that sort of age.

Of the nineteen adoptive families who were interviewed and who had indicated that their child's foster carer had actively and appropriately shared materials that they had provided for their child, all but two adopters described subsequent introductions during which they had enjoyed a predominantly positive relationship with their child's foster carer. Typically, these adopters described foster carers who were welcoming, supportive, had given them privacy and had made them feel at ease. This group of foster carers had also frequently been flexible and pro-active during introductions, for example by actively encouraging and facilitating a connection between the adopters and their child, or through simple acts of generosity and openness, such as asking the adopters to share meals with them. Adopters often expressed an intense appreciation of the care that foster carers had provided for their child, commenting on the positive changes that they knew had taken place whilst the child had lived with them. Some adopters in this group noted that foster carers had done a

'remarkable job' or *'worked wonders'* or commented that during introductions foster carers had made them feel *'part of the family.'*

In four of these 17 cases, adopters described situations in which they had maintained a predominantly positive relationship with their child's foster carer throughout introductions, whilst recognising that the foster carer was significantly struggling with their emotions due to the child's imminent move. Ruth was one such adopter. She described how the foster carer had *'very explicitly'* told her how hard she would find the child's departure, and commented on the difficulty in such circumstances of getting used to the practical aspects of caring for her child as well as *'making that emotional connection'* in a *'very public way'* with the foster carer and several social workers present:

And the fact that it was hard for [the foster carer], you know, added another layer on top of all the crazy emotion in any case.

In this instance, Ruth indicated that professional support during introductions both for her and for the foster carer had helped ameliorate some of the potential difficulties.

Interestingly, there were at least two cases in which, whilst the foster carer's sense of grief and loss had not unduly affected introductions, it had none-the-less had long-lasting consequences. In these two cases, all contact between the child and their foster carer had ceased soon after the child's move, due to related difficulties.

Seven interviewees indicated that introductions had been problematic due to the dynamic with their child's foster carer. Difficulties included situations in which the foster carers had not shared important information about the child; had allowed other children in the fostering family to dominate attention during introductions, and one incident in which the foster carer had shared confidential information about the adopters with her neighbours. In several instances, adopters expressed significant concerns about the care that foster carers had

provided for their child. This group of adopters who indicated that introductions had been 'problematic' included all five cases in which the adopter had reported that their child's foster carer had not used materials that they had provided for their child, had used them inappropriately or, in one instance, had not commented on whether the materials had been shared by the foster carer.

The foster carer's struggle with their own sense of grief and loss was raised as a key factor in five of these seven cases of 'problematic' introductions, including three cases in which materials had not been utilised appropriately. In two cases adopters stated that the foster carers had wished to adopt the child themselves. One adopter felt as if she had been *'taking the foster carer's child away.'* Another, Jane, described problematic introductions in which her child's foster family had been '*in denial'* that her son was leaving them. Still referring to herself as '*Mummy'* during introductions, Jane felt that the foster carer had:

lost the professional distance she needed to be able to do the job of a foster carer.

Jane commented that, as a result, preparation for her son's move which included the album that she had prepared for him had not been:

reinforced by the foster family, whereas in other situations it would have been.

She described how her son was 'bewildered' by his experience of introductions.

Terri was another adopter who felt that her child's transition had been adversely affected by his foster carer's unmanaged grief. She noted that the preparation that her son had received prior to his move to her care had been poor. She appeared reluctant to apportion responsibility to any one individual, instead highlighting how *'the system'* had let her son down. Support for the foster carers, who had cared for her son for two years and who were *'dealing with their own emotions'* during introductions was lacking, Terri noted. Difficulties were compounded by the lack of appropriate training available for the foster carers:

there was nothing really about building the emotional links, attachment and the effects of neglect, all those […] seemed to be hugely lacking.

Terri reflected that such deficits had been apparent in her interactions with the professionals she had had contact with throughout her experience of adoption, as well as with the foster carer.

Another foster carer, reputed to have wanted to adopt the child themselves, had caused significant distress for the adopters by sharing the book and DVD that they had prepared for him within the local community. Neighbours had subsequently appeared during introductions, and aggressively quizzed the adopters on their suitability to parent their adoptive son.

In just two interviews, adopters reported that materials had not been shared with their children prior to introductions due to factors that, in their perception, were not primarily connected to the foster carer's sense of grief and loss. Olive and Ffion's adopter Fran was one of these; she reported that she had given the girls' foster carer craft materials for them prior to meeting, hoping that she would help them make decorations for their new bedroom. The foster carer had declined, stating simply *'I don't do craft.'* This lack of engagement with materials appeared to be symptomatic of the carer's *'hands-off'* approach during introductions, in which the adoptive parents were discouraged from spending any time with the children in the carers' home. Fran felt that the carers had also withheld important information about the older child's emotional needs. These introductions had been enmeshed in particularly problematic circumstances surrounding the children's transition that included a fostering household managing pressures unrelated to the children's care. The foster carer subsequently reneged on all contact arrangements with the children, leaving them feeling let down and upset.

Familiarisation

This theme included evidence of familiarisation of the adoptive child with their new family occurring, the ways in which foster carers had shared materials with the child, and the use of materials with very young children.

Thirty-six (56%) respondents to the questionnaire provided comments in an open box, in response to the 'usefulness' of materials that they had provided. Of these, twelve adopters referred to how they felt that the materials had helped their child become familiarised with them in some way:

It definitely seemed that he recognised us from enlarged photos and voice recordings.

One adopter, Paula, described during an interview how her baby appeared to have been successfully familiarised with her and partner's voices, and the positive impact that this had had on their first meeting:

We'd done a book you know where it opens and you do embarrassing, 'hi I'm Paula I'm going to be your forever mummy and this is our house' and, and […] [foster carer's name] says usually he would cry when he met new people so we sat on the settee and probably because […] we sound so different he instantly recognised our voice, […] he was perfectly at ease with us and [foster carer] thinks it's because a combination of that book and we sounded so different to you know [foster carer] … [the foster carer said] he definitely didn't react how he would usually react to people coming into her house.

Children's ability to recognise the wider adoptive family, including pets, from photographs and voice recordings was also raised by interviewees, as was children's ability to recognise features of their new home.

Adopters recalled how foster carers had strategically placed photographs of the would-be parents in multiple areas of the house, so that the child had easy access to them; at

the child's height, next to their high chair, on table mats, at the bottom of the stairs or in the child's bedroom, for example. Pippa noted:

We were asked to print off big photos of the two of us so she could have them by her cot.

Adopters also described ways in which foster carers had helped familiarise children with their adoptive families through the frequent, repetitive and active discussion of photographs and 'talking albums' with the child before introductions had started. Sometimes these discussions had been incorporated into daily routines, such as mealtimes or sleep. Andy was one of several adopters who commented on how his child's foster carer had used the album he had prepared for his son:

[the foster carer] used to read the books at night, instead of reading him a storybook before he met us, she would be reading him the story.

On one occasion, an adopter mentioned how the whole fostering family had helped prepare a sibling pair for their move to their adoptive family, by reading them their book and watching the DVD that their new parents had prepared for them together, in a relaxed family atmosphere.

In our questionnaire, ten respondents (15.6%) were unsure of the usefulness of all or some of the materials at the time that they had been shared, due to their child's young age; in three of these instances the adopters also suggested that the materials had not been shared, or had been shared inadequately:

As she was so young she didn't really take much notice. Also foster carer didn't use them correctly prior to introduction.

Other adopters, including Paula, whose experience was described above, observed how their infants *had* been helped to become familiarised with their adoptive family, prior to

introductions commencing. Sally, who had adopted siblings aged one and two, was also one such parent. She recalled that she had received training on preparing materials for children prior to meeting them and had subsequently provided a DVD and photo albums for her children. She had differentiated these to reflect the children's developmental stages, and indicated that they had been successfully utilised by her children's foster carer:

Sophie had a soft book, and Kit had […] the Lamaze butterfly with four pictures and you opened it and it said 'hello'. […] it was funny because when we arrived at their house on the first day they came to us and Sophie said, 'Mummy, Daddy,' and rushed and got our pictures. The [foster carers] had put them up round the house, so good work.

In two instances where adopters of infants expressed uncertainty of the impact of the materials *at the time* of their child's move, they noted the on-going significance of the materials approximately four years later:

Our daughter was 8 months old so unsure if the photos helped her recognise us or if the toy helped however the teddy is now her favourite and she loves looking back at photos of when we met and see[ing] the teddy there.

Connection

Adopters' descriptions of how their child had become familiarised with their voice and appearance through materials shared, as described above, often seemed to lay the foundations for an embryonic sense of 'connection' with their child. Further analysis of their comments revealed other aspects of 'connection' between the child (and sometimes their foster carer) and the adoptive family. This theme of 'connection' relating to materials shared included adopters' experiences of being called 'Mummy' or 'Daddy' on first meeting; opportunities created for reciprocal communication between foster carers, children and their

prospective adopters prior to introductions, and adopters' perceptions of the long-term impact of the items they had shared with their child prior to introductions starting.

Some caution has been expressed in the putative literature about referring to prospective adopters to their would-be children as 'Mums' and 'Dads' prior to or soon after meeting, as by association this concept may be highly emotive and evocative of past experiences of fear if not terror, for example (Burnell et al., 2009). Nevertheless, some adopters mentioned that they had called themselves '*Mummy*' or '*Daddy*' in photobooks and audio recordings that they had gifted their children, and eight of the twenty-four interviewees described experiences in which, having been familiarised with their appearance or voice by the use of photographic and audio materials prior to meeting, their adoptive child had called them '*Mummy*' or '*Daddy*' on first meeting. Understandably, some adopters expressed delight at this happening. When asked how this had made him feel, Leigh commented:

Oh that was just, nothing can prepare you for that [laughs].

Two adopters expressed some caution, concern or even discomfort about being called '*Mummy*' or '*Daddy*' from the outset, however, including Tracey:

But obviously that wasn't genuine because she you know she was just like this person is going to look after me you know so I'm going to be nice to them you know?

The complexity and range of emotion experienced by some adopters in response to being called '*Mummy*' or '*Daddy*' early on was illustrated by Emyr, who had made a DVD for his would-be son. On their very first meeting, he recalled seeing his son waving at the window as he approached, and calling out '*Daddy*':

Which we weren't expecting. It was a bit of a shock.

Because we thought he would get to know us a bit, he might ask to call us 'Mummy' and 'Daddy' in a few weeks, or see what he thinks of us first, but no he was fully on board […] he had been really well prepared, and it was overwhelming, because here was this little boy that we had been waiting for…

However, despite initial surprise about his son's response, the experience had left Emyr feeling positive and confident about the adoption:

I thought it was wonderful he was so on board, and I thought, 'well this is going to work'.

An infrequent but recurring theme occurring in interviews with adopters was how the materials that they had provided for their child had generated reciprocal communication. For example, Rhian described how her children's foster carer had phoned her prior to introductions starting and told her that the children had been looking at their photobook and watching their DVD and were *'really excited'* about meeting their new parents. Rhian indicated that this interaction had left her feeling positive and less '*daunted*' by the prospect of introductions starting.

Sam and Jo described the impact of seeing a film sent to them by their children's foster carer prior to introductions, showing their children looking at their photobook:

Just to see [the children] moving, they weren't just pictures. To see their mannerisms. … Just [their] little personalities came out …

This experience had prompted the adopters to send the children a DVD of themselves. In another case, Kim reported how prior to introductions starting she had enjoyed receiving a photograph from a social worker, showing her daughter Harriet holding the toy and blanket that she had given her.

It was striking to note the ongoing impact of the materials that eleven adopters described at the time of the questionnaire, approximately four years after children had joined their adoptive families. Items they had shared with their child prior to meeting continued to be an enduring source of comfort, pleasure and connection between the child and their adoptive family. One adopter described how a soft toy continued to be her daughter's *'favourite cuddly.'* Another described how:

After 4 years our son still very much relies on the blanket for comfort - it was the very first thing that connected us to him.

Others reported how their child still enjoyed looking back at photo albums that they had shared prior to meeting, and that these and other materials still played an important role in the adoptive family's identity:

The photo book and special toy are still big parts of our lives.

Joey's mother Sarah, mentioned above, shared with the researcher photographs given to her by her child's foster carer, and still frequently re-visited. These recorded some of the earliest points of connection between her, her husband and their son:

So there he is with the [photo]book ... And there is him kissing our pictures.

Combined with the sensitivity, skill and diligence of the foster carer, it seemed that the book and photographs shared prior to meeting had, as for other children, become a vital keystone linking his past and present life.

Discussion

Whilst practice guidance (e.g. Fahlberg, 1994; Schofield and Beek, 2006; Dunbar, 2009) suggests that the provision of photographic and audio materials may help prepare a child for their move to their adoptive family, there is a gap in the literature concerning the

experiences of individuals involved in this process, which we sought to address. The findings indicate that most adopters reported that they felt that the materials they had shared had significantly helped their children, including some infants. In such cases, the materials appeared to form a central part of the 'bridge' between the foster carers and adopters to which Browning refers (Browning, 2015). Others, however, expressed uncertainties about the value of using visual or audio materials with children who were deemed 'too young'. This is interesting, as there is an established body of research demonstrating that children can recognise faces and voices from the early weeks of life (Leman, Bremner, Parke and Gauvain, 2012: 126). This uncertainty expressed by some adopters about the usefulness and possibilities of preparing infants and very young children may reflect the need for social workers to have access to more child development content in their training, to enable them to be more sensitive to child development milestones, and thus steer the effective use of materials.

The effectiveness of the use of materials was perceived by parents to be contingent upon the child's foster carer having the skills, capacity, willingness and support to utilise the materials effectively. In all five cases in which adopters indicated that their child's foster carer had not utilised the materials, had used them inappropriately or did not indicate whether the foster carer had used them, this appeared to have been an early indicator of wider difficulties in the foster carers' capacity to work with the adopter to support their child through their transition from foster care to adoption.

From our interviews, the seven adopters who found that the foster carer's role during introductions had been significantly problematic in some way represent twenty-nine percent of our sample (N=24). Selwyn and colleagues also reported that about thirty percent of foster carers were thought to have behaved in ways which had hindered introductions and transitions (Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa, 2015: 89). A lower figure of dissatisfaction

might have been expected in our study, which in contrast with that of Selwyn et al. did not focus on adoptive families where the child had already left home or was at high risk of leaving home.

The grief and loss experienced by foster carers was a significant theme in at least nine of the interviews with adopters. Five adopters appeared to indicate that this had significantly impacted on their experience of support from their child's foster carer during introductions to their child. It seems likely that these foster carers were also unable to effectively help contain the child's complex emotions in the period leading up to, during or after introductions to their adoptive parents had taken place. Our findings corroborate findings of other studies (Selwyn, Meakings and Wijedasa, 2015; Selwyn and Meakings, 2015; Neil, Young and Hartley 2018; Boswell and Cudmore, 2014) that grief experienced by foster carers may affect their capacity to work with adopters to support the child from the earliest stages of the child's transition. There appears to have been little qualitative research on the nature of the grief or attendant support needs that foster carers experience when a child leaves their care to be placed for adoption. Hebert, Kulkin and McLean (2013) suggest that foster carers can harbour the same level of care, concern and hopes for foster children as for their 'own' children, and that the '*disenfranchised*' nature of a foster carer's grief may compound difficulties. A greater understanding of the nature of the grief processes experienced by foster carers could be beneficial in enabling appropriate, attuned support and training for foster carers involved in preparing children for adoption.

The temptation of adults involved in the transition process maybe for them to focus on the 'positives' of the child's move, not wanting to place a 'downer' on the adoption (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014) and the child's grief may become 'disenfranchised' in the process. Whilst material objects can assist a child in their transition from foster care to adoption, they cannot be substitutes for a foster carer who has the emotional skills to help a child to manage

the considerable emotional challenge of moving in with new parents, nor be used simplistically as evidence of whether a child has been adequately prepared. A child who is very attached to their foster carer may find it exceptionally painful to be asked to think about a new set of parents, which will inevitably make a foster carer's task of helping a child prepare for a move more difficult, with or without the careful provision of materials. Potential pitfalls of utilising materials should also be considered. For example, the adopter's desire to have a child who already seems to 'know' and 'belong' to them on first meeting may superficially be met through the process of familiarising a child with the appearance of their adoptive family, particularly in conjunction with the immediate use of the signifiers 'Mummy' and 'Daddy'. Whilst this experience may please some adopters, possibly satisfying a fantasy of immediate 'connection', it is likely to prove unrealistic and may put excessive pressure on the child and their foster carer.

Implications for policy and practice

Findings from this study reflect some of the principles of the Practice Development Project *Moving to Adoption* (Neil, Schofield and Beek, 2018). For example, significant elements of children's successful transitions into life with their adoptive families include opportunities for foster carers and adopters to build relationships prior to introductions starting, and adequate support being available to help facilitate positive relationships between all individuals involved, prior to, during and after the child's move. Likewise, opportunities are required for children and their prospective adopters to engage in a *gradual* process of familiarisation and trust-building. This study suggests that the sharing of photographic and other materials provided by adopters prior to meeting their child may be an important early stage in the promotion of familiarisation and trust between children and their prospective adopters, as well as potentially between adopters and their child's foster carer. The ubiquity

of digital media and its ease of access is likely to provide increasing opportunities for reciprocal communication between foster carers and adopters, for example.

It is evident that the foster carer's role in the success or otherwise of children's transitions is crucial. Of particular concern, therefore, are the findings of The Fostering Network's recent survey *State of the Nation's Foster Care 2019,* which indicate that foster carers frequently feel undervalued, and excluded from the central team involved in planning for the child in their care. The survey also suggests that many foster carers provide placements for children who are outside the parameters of their registration. One may conclude, therefore, that foster carers are not always specifically registered to provide placements for children being placed for adoption or trained and appropriately supported for this most sensitive and delicate of tasks.

As Boswell and Cudmore (2014) highlight, the child's loss in the transition from foster care to adoption is almost always overlooked; the gains, however profound, may not be immediately felt by the child. These 'messy' feelings of loss of people, pets and places are likely to be coupled with a range of emotions, such as anxiety and excitement, about the child's move to their as-yet unknown adoptive family. Throughout the child's transition, materials can be utilised by adults to help enable a child to express the difficult feelings that are bound to accompany this overwhelming experience. This could include the use by adopters of photographs and other items brought from the child's birth and foster homes, to help the child feel that old relationships are still valued and remembered while they are in their new homes.

Limitations

This study explores the experiences of adopters, and other voices such as those of children and foster carers need to be included in future research. These could, for example,

specifically address how materials are or could be used as prompts, to explore any uncertainties or worries that a child may have about their proposed adoption. Specific questions about photographic and other materials that adopters may have provided for their child prior to meeting were not asked during our interviews. Data emerged primarily in the context of more general discussions about children's preparation to move into their adoptive home. This topic was typically discussed less frequently or in less detail with parents who had adopted infants. Caution should be applied when attempting to generalise from our interview data.

Conclusion

Materials provided by adopters and shared by foster carers with children may significantly help a child during their transition to life with their adoptive family. The role and function of materials shared will depend on the ways and 'spirit' in which they are shared with the child. This will reflect the extent to which the foster carer is able to provide the child with a safe space in which they can discuss their fears or concerns about leaving their foster family to join their adoptive family. Materials provided by prospective adopters can also provide opportunities for positive, reciprocal communication between individuals, which may help forge adaptive relationships at an early stage, underlining the principle that the adoption of children is a process rather than an end (Quinton, 2012).

In every life, visual materials can be key ways in which memories and life narratives are formed (Spence and Holland, 1991 in Brookfield, Brown and Reavey, 2008: 480). Times of rupture or challenge to the ongoing familial story require careful management, and here photographs (and other items) may play an important role (Haaken, 1998 in Brookfield et al., 2008: 476). Materials shared by adopters may, alongside items shared by foster carers and birth families, become a keystone linking a child's life with their current family with life with previous families they have lived with, all of whom form a part of the child's identity.

Materials can thereby play a significant role in helping children develop a congruent story of how they joined their permanent family, assisting a dialogue of *'open, honest and respectful parent-child communication'* between children and their adoptive families (Brodzinsky, 2011: 206), consistent with *'the continuity of the line of an individual's existence'* (Winnicott, 1986 in http://www.thechildrenwerefine.co.uk/our-knowledge-base.html). This may help reduce the potential for misunderstanding of their past over the life course. This appears true of infants and very young children who may have no conscious memory of the move from their foster home, and older children who may have memories of sharing the 'talking albums' with their foster carers.

Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank all the adoptive parents who have contributed their valuable time and experiences to this study. We would also like to thank our colleagues who undertook the interviews with adoptive parents in this study; Sarah Meakings, Heather Ottaway, Rebecca Anthony and Claire Palmer, and Janet Whitley for her research assistance. We are also very grateful for the insightful comments received during the peer review process, which have been reflected in this paper.

Note

1. All names have been changed to retain anonymity.

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