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Managing Adoption Breakdown

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Managing adoption breakdown

The breakdown of an adoption placement after the child has been living with their adoptive family for several years can be intensely difficult and distressing for the children and young people; their adopters and their immediate family .

This session will cover the following messages for practice :

- What do we know from research?
- What response should there be when adopters contact the local authority at a point of crisis?
- What is the place of an intervention meeting as part of the adoption support being offered?
- How does the Secure Base model help inform workers supporting the family through their difficulties or working with all involved to plan the child's return to care?
- Where an adoption placement must end, how should decisions be made about the ongoing role of the family in the child's life
- What support should be provided for the child, the adoptive parents and any siblings

What do we know from research?

Placement Disruption

Definition:

A post order disruption was defined as when a child or young person had left their home under the age of 18 years old. They may have become looked after, be living independently, or living with extended family or friends. Most of the young people in the Selwyn study who had experienced a disruption had become looked after. Selwyn 2014

Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005

Local authority must provide;

- Financial support.
- Support groups for adopted children, adoptive parents and birth parents
- Assistance, including mediation services, in relation to arrangements for contact between an adoptive child and their parents, family members or siblings
- Therapeutic services for adoptive children.
- Assistance to ensure the continuance of the relationship between an adoptive child and his adoptive parent, including training for adoptive parents to meet any special needs of the child;
- Respite care.
- Counselling, advice and information.

Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005

- Requires the provision of assistance where disruption of an adoptive placement or adoption arrangement following the making of an adoption order has occurred **or is in danger of occurring**, including:
 - Making arrangements for the provision of mediation services and
 - Organising and running meetings to discuss disruption in such placements or arrangements.

Factors associated with disruption

- Where children were older at the point of entry to care,
- Had had more moves whilst in care,
- Were over four years old when placed for adoption,
- Where there had been a longer time period between the time of placement and the adoption order being made and
- Disruption during their teenage years.

Factors associated with disruption

- Poorly managed introductions
- Adopters feeling unsupported by social workers during introductions
- Nearly half of adopters thought that they had not been given important information
- Even more thought that the significance of what they were given was not fully explained
- Child to parent violence.

Behaviour indicators after placement

- Difficulty forming close relationships
- Avoidant of intimacy and comfort
- Controlling and manipulative behaviours
- Sleep problems and an inability to play.
- Escalation with behaviour becoming more challenging,
- Aggression from children, even from a young age
- Self-harm
- Sexualised behaviours.

Issues arising from adopter assessments

- The majority of parents said they had been truthful during the assessment process, but about **one in five revealed that they had downplayed difficulties, or had not been very honest** because they did not want to jeopardise their chances of being approved.
- There were adopters who did not disclose that their **marriage was under strain**, that they were **struggling to come to terms with a recent miscarriage**, or that they were **having fertility treatment** whilst being assessed as prospective adopters.
- Seven of the adoptive parents (5 'At home' and 2 'Left home') knew that the **panel had reservations about their application**.
- Three parents said that they had been turned down by another agency.

Practice Point

It is important that social workers and family finders take time to read all available files and reports on the child, including contact observations, to help build an accurate picture of the child and an understanding of how their early life has impacted on their attachments and their development.

Guide to Adoption Disruption, Elaine Dibben, Community Care Inform, February 2017

Siblings

Selwyn identified that, 'sibling relationships were often described as difficult for parents to manage where each child in the sibling group had special needs' and that 'fractious relationships...had been evident from the very early days and...'the strained sibling dynamics had been central to the parenting challenges they faced over the years'.

'We are struggling with her negative interaction with her brother, caused by jealousy of any attention we may give him. It requires us having to separate them for a couple of hours each day and needs two adults to deal with.'

5 months after placement

'His older half-sibling has been extremely difficult since December 2016. This has seriously impacted J. He is angry, frightened and emotional! I have involved SENAS, his placing LA, psychologist etc. but still no resolution. R (older child) appears to have early trauma.'

2 ½ years after placement

Shelton 2017

Practice Point

A comprehensive sibling assessment, which identifies the needs of the individual children but also the combination of the needs of all the siblings, is very important. It helps ensure the prospective adopters understand the challenge of meeting the needs of more than one child, and that the appropriate support is offered from the beginning of the placement.

Adoption Support Plan

ASR 2005 sets out that assessment should look at;

- The needs of the person being assessed and how these might be met.
- The needs of the adoptive family and how these might be met.
- The needs, including developmental needs, of the adoptive child and how these might be met.
- The parenting capacity of the adoptive parent.
- Wider family and environmental factors.
- In the case of a child who is, or was, placed or matched for adoption, the circumstances that led to the child being so placed or matched.
- Any previous assessment of needs for adoption support services undertaken in relation to the person in question

Support post adoption order

- Some agencies offer an optional annual visit or telephone call post-adoption to 'touch base' with adopters. This allows them to pick up on any issues and offer signposting or services where needed. This approach may avoid the risk of the crisis call when it becomes much harder to address issues that have become more embedded.
- When adopters are reporting challenges post placement, holding an early review of the adoption support plan will help to identify where additional supports and services may be needed.
- Adopters may be anxious about notifying their social workers of a significant change in their circumstances for fear the child will be removed, but they should be encouraged to maintain contact and feel confident to ask for help if their circumstances change.

What response should there be when adopters contact the local authority at a point of crisis?

Managing the Referral

- Point of contact – the adoption team / post adoption team
- Point of contact -Referrals from other professionals – health visitors, GP, police, CAMHS, teachers received by childcare duty / EDT
- Who co-ordinates the response? May depend on whether there is a CP issue.
- Need to consider support for adopters
- Assessment of Adoption Support Needs
- Managing disruption

A Cry for Help or A Plea for Closure?

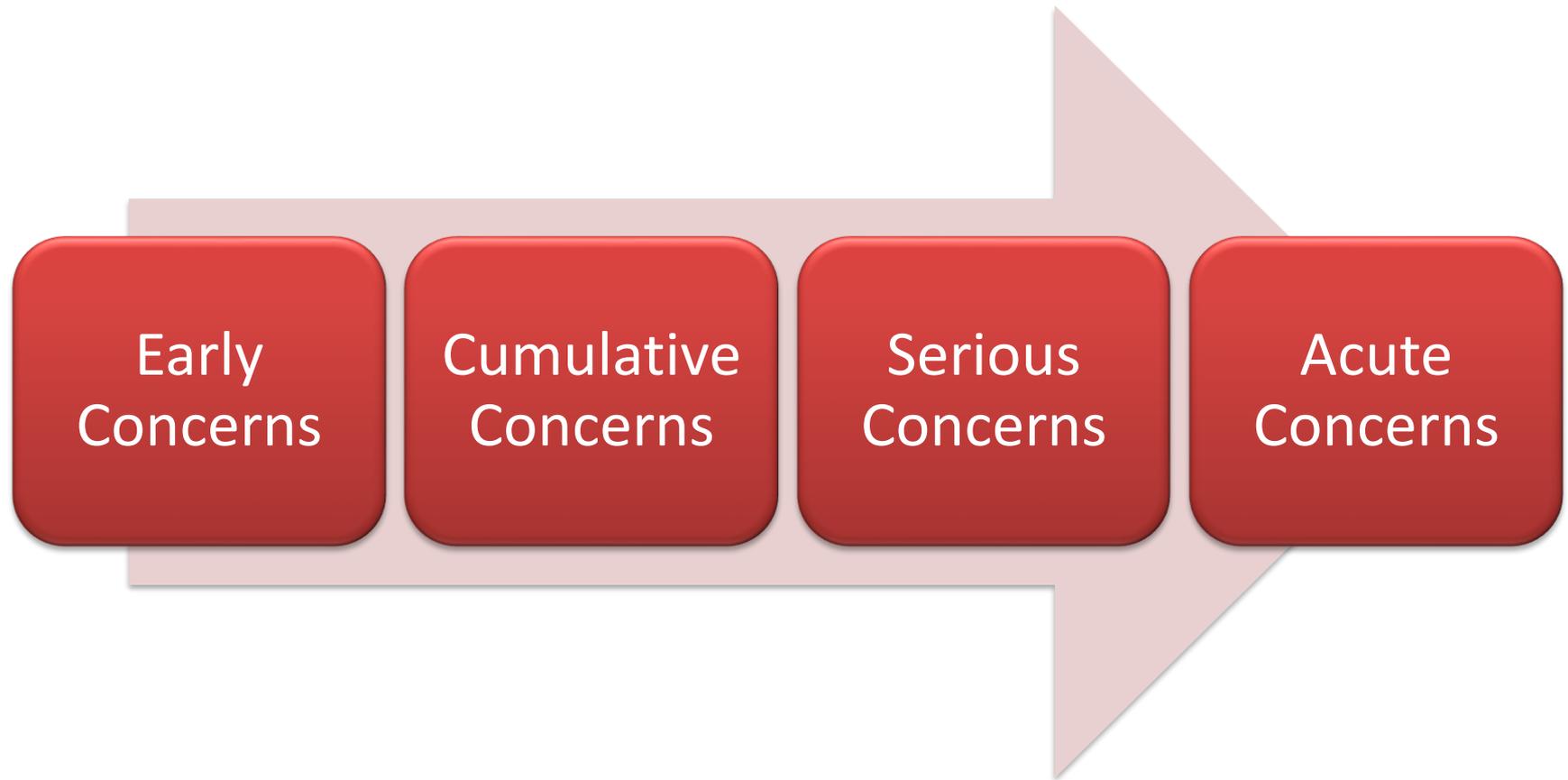
Argent & Coleman - 2012

When is a disruption not a disruption?

Apart from the carer asking for the child to be removed, what factors might indicate whether this is “a plea for closure” or “a cry for help?”

How does the Secure Base model help inform workers supporting the family through their difficulties or working with all involved to plan the child's return to care?

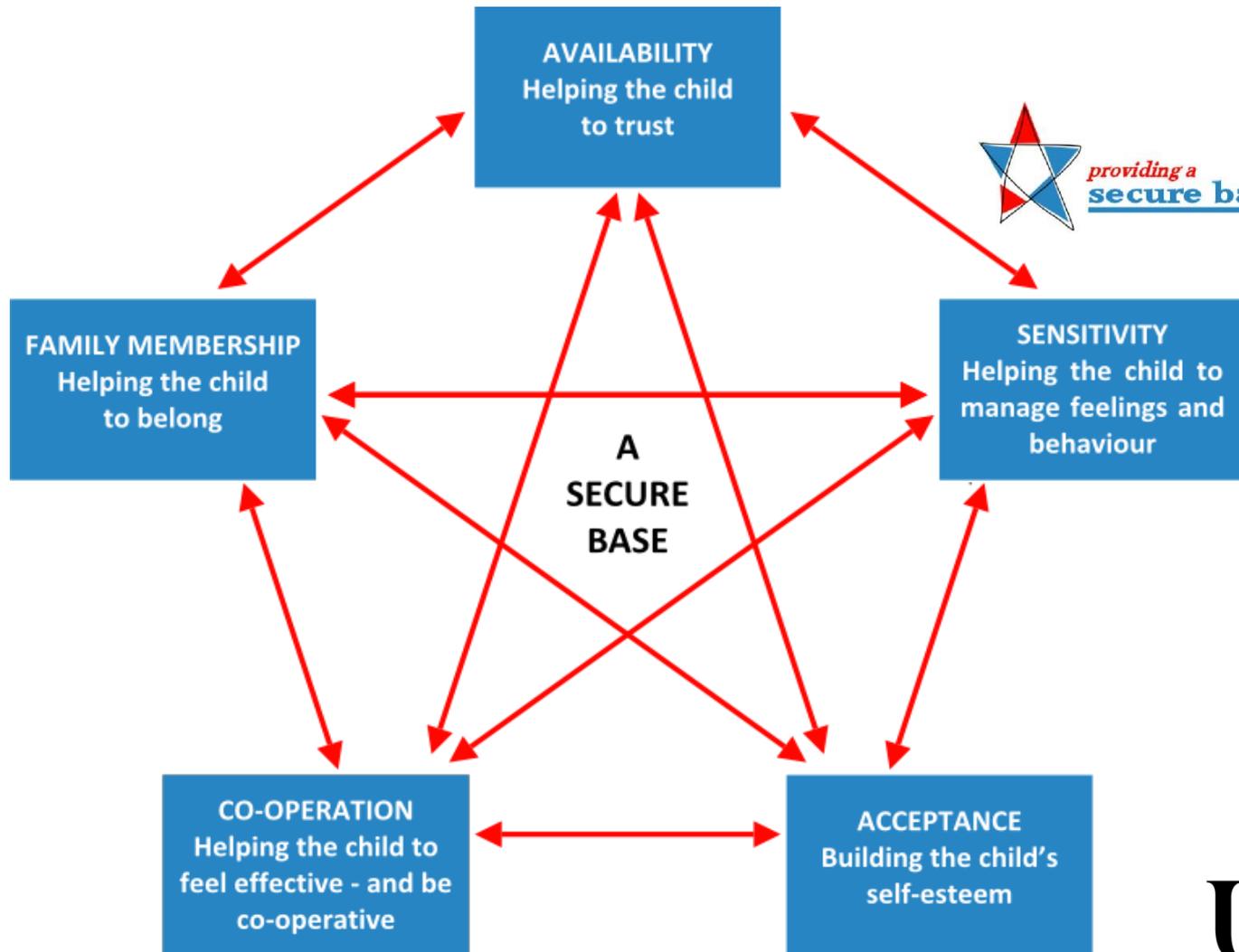
Types and Sources of placement concerns



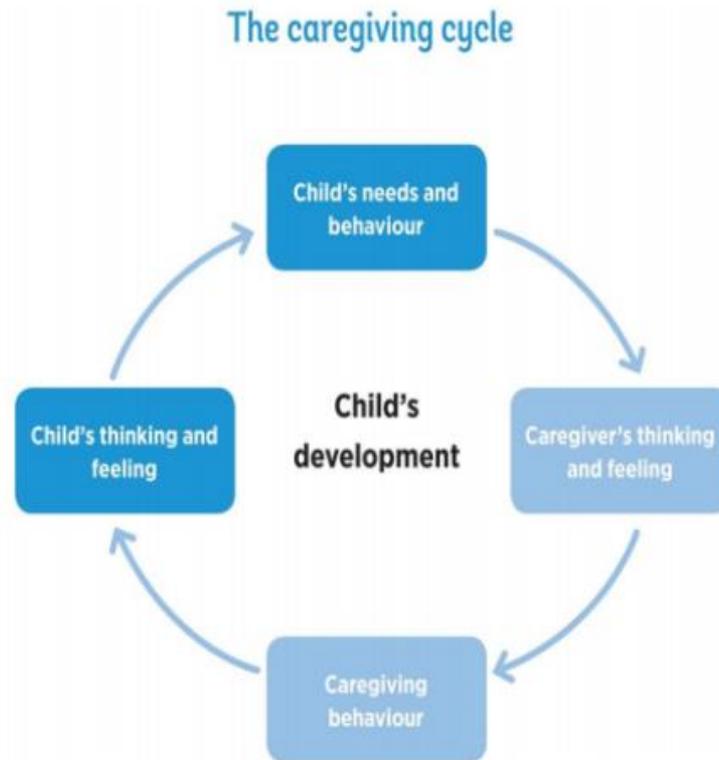
Compassion Fatigue

- Burnout
 - physical and emotional exhaustion, anger, frustration, hopelessness, depression and feeling inefficient in your job
- Secondary traumatic stress
 - develops when the individual becomes directly affected by the trauma experienced by those they are caring for and/ or supporting at work
- Compassion satisfaction
 - associated with the positive aspects of providing care and support to others within the working environment, and includes such features as altruism, satisfaction with the work undertaken with those affected by trauma, and the support derived from team members

The Secure Base Model



The Caregiving Cycle



Secure Base Interview

1. When children and young people are thought to be in need or at risk.
2. It can identify areas for further development and support.
3. As part of the routine supervision of foster carers.
4. As part of the foster carer(s)' annual review.
- 5. When fostering or adoptive placements are in difficulties.**
6. In residential settings.

What is the place of an
intervention meeting as part of
the adoption support being
offered?

Intervention meetings

Also known as 'lifeboat meeting' or a 'placement support meeting'.

- To enhance the placement not to unpick it
- To demonstrate support for the child and the carers:
 - **What helps, what doesn't, what would help more?**
- To share and acknowledge feelings rather than apportion blame
- Identify issues leading to difficulties and move things on
- To make plans to meet needs and set time limits for action
- To hear and understand the child's wishes and feelings
- Realistic risk assessment
- To leave the door open for continuation or disruption

Intervening before disruption

- Addressing issues relating to health, education or therapy
- Support to adopters to enhance parenting skills
- Providing short breaks using respite of family and friends
- Explore known information and unknown or missing information (for the child or the parents)
- Try to ensure that any decisions needing funding can be agreed in principle by someone attending meeting or be realistic about what will need to be agreed elsewhere

What to look for

- Need for open exchange of views and feelings from the start; need for trusting relationship
- Look out for early evidence of new parents' / carers disappointed expectations, withdrawal of warmth and thoughts of giving up
- need for parent to give regular positive messages to child and not take rejection personally
- Placement will be at risk if child does not begin to show selective, affectionate feelings over time, **or** if parents can't accept unengaged behaviour
- Is there a need for long standing direct work or therapy?

Supporting Placements

- Workers providing a secure base for adopters– advice and guidance
- Communication & openness
- Listen, watch, reflect, analyse, hear anxiety and pain
- Encourage!
- Significance of anniversaries, holidays, festivals
- Adequate resources available for areas of vulnerability: respite care, therapy, non violent resistance (NVR) training
- Regular review

Supporting Staff

Containment for adoption support social workers.

Workers need regular opportunities to reflect on the emotional aspects of their practice and explore the significance of what they have heard, seen and experienced without fear of criticism, ridicule or blame. They need what might be termed as exploration within a “containing context”.

CoramBAAF Briefing, Thomas & Simmonds, January 2018,

Where an adoption placement must end
how should decisions be made about the
ongoing role of the family in the child's
life?

What support should be provided for the
child, the adoptive parents and any
siblings?

Sometimes disruption is inevitable

- Every disruption of placement (which may include home and school) for a traumatised child should be recognised as a *profound threat*
- Disruptions may increase developmental trauma by reinforcing traumatic patterns for the child
 - Unplanned transitions
 - Adults not in control of planning process
 - Destructive endings

However *disruptions managed well enables the team to take control of the process and change the messages to the child*

- Attachment relationships can endure
- Adults make and carry through plans for the wellbeing and safety of the child

Impact of disruption: the child

- The child's distress may be comparable to the feelings aroused by the original separation from their birth family
- Even if the child has wanted the placement to end, it is another experience of abandonment.
- "What is it about me that makes everyone give up on me?"
- "I do bad things, because I'm bad and make people get rid of me".

Supporting Children

- Carers and workers need to be able to support the child through the process of grief and loss
- Thought given to any continuing role for the adopters and other family members in the child's life e.g. decision making and contact
- Use of life story work and therapy to help child make sense of what has happened when the time is right

Impact of disruption: the adopters

Anger:

- With the social workers for concealing the facts
- With the foster carers for not telling the truth
- With the support services for being unavailable or inappropriate
- With everyone because this was not the child they hoped for
- With themselves and each other because they have failed the child and failed as parents

Relief / Guilt / Withdrawal

- Some families have to withdraw to “nurse their wounds”
- They do not want to put their case, to have counselling or to examine the process that led to disruption
- They often find it too painful to keep in any sort of contact with the child
- Families who withdraw are the most difficult families to work with after disruption, but they are probably in the greatest need of support

Supporting Adopters and Family Members

- Separate support worker for adopters - some may want to take up offer of counselling
- Support and encourage to engage in the disruption meeting
- Signposting to adopter support services, groups,
- Don't forget other children in the family – siblings, birth children
- Importance of maintaining sibling relationships

Impact of disruption: the agency

- Resentment of energy and scarce professional time spent on placement
- Doubt about own judgement and avoidance of future risks
- Anger and self-reproach about damage done to child
- Tension between workers about divided responsibilities
- Guilt and blame may contend with processes of understanding and learning.

Supporting staff

- Use disruption meeting to aid understanding and promote learning from the situation
- Use supervision to work through any issues for workers

Using disruption meetings constructively

- When placements end with an unplanned transition the whole network is affected
- It is important to transform this into a constructive ending for the child and for the network
- This will involve ensuring that:
 - All the feelings are processed and contained
 - The history of the placement is clear and agreed
 - Others can recognise and acknowledge the gifts the child brought into their lives
 - Key attachment relationships are recognised as lifelong
 - Strengths and resilience factors are identified for the child and for everyone affected by exposure to trauma

“I never went back, but she only lives round the corner, and I still call them mum and dad, so I do still go and see mum and dad. They are still family, they still give me birthday presents, they still give me Christmas presents, they still take me shopping and they still are mum and dad...They never ever said, “You can’t come back.” They never said, “We don’t want anything to do with you anymore, you’re not our son.” They’ve always been there for me if I’ve needed anything, always been there for me.”

“I hope that she’ll stay perhaps attached, maybe at arm’s length where she feels comfortable. But I hope she always thinks that we’re her adoptive parents and always her friends.”

References

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- Dibben, E (2017) Guide to adoption disruption, Community Care Inform
- CoramBAAF Briefing, Thomas & Simmonds, January 2018,

The end

Thank you for attending this presentation.

Do contact us if you would like to discuss the issues further –

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