

'Adoption activity days' can help children find new families

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Children's parties or activity days, where prospective adopters meet children awaiting adoption, could be part of the solution to the current adoption crisis, according to research that will be showcased during the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science.

"Such parties or activity days went out of fashion in the 1980s but no one is sure why," says Katherine Runswick-Cole of Manchester Metropolitan University who led the research. "However, our [pilot study](#) has shown an overwhelmingly positive response from practitioners, adopters and the children themselves."

Evidence from the United States suggests that adoption activity days are twice as effective as any other method of family finding for children who are waiting for adoptive families. Around 30 per cent of children are placed in an adoptive family after such days, compared with less than 15 per cent through normal channels.

Dr Runswick-Cole suggests that early findings from their pilot project, which is being run with the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and a group of local authorities in the East Midlands, suggest that such success could be replicated in the UK. Almost 20 per cent of children from the first two parties have been matched with families.

The children who attend the days are usually 'hard to place' – older

children or children with complex histories who have been waiting for a long time. The researchers found that when prospective adopters meet children in a [social environment](#) they make bonds with them, something that cannot happen from reading their written histories only.

"It often changes prospective adopters' ideas about the kinds of children they might like to adopt," says Dr Runswick-Cole. She gives the example of Alisha (not her real name) who has foetal alcohol syndrome and a 50 per cent chance of inheriting a genetic condition from her father. Previously, despite efforts on the part of her social workers, no family had come forward to adopt her. But now Alisha is living with adoptive parents who met her at the activity day, and were captivated by her delightful personality.

The activity days have also proved to be beneficial for social workers, as they can meet and network with other [social workers](#) supporting the prospective adopters. For the children, the activity days are a fun day out with archery, zip wires, canoeing, craft-making and games. In many ways, they are like an ordinary children's party with party bags and a big tea.

There has been considerable interest in the pilot project from Government departments and considerations to roll it out nationwide. However, Dr Runswick-Cole sounds a note of caution. "They may seem like ordinary children's parties", she says, "but they are very professionally organised with intensive preparation for the children and the adults in order to manage expectations and fears both before and after the event. It is vital that the process is fully understood before it is widely replicated."

To assist with awareness-raising about the benefits and complexities of such events, the ESRC is funding a public seminar in Manchester on 3 November 2012 in the run up to Adoption Week, during the Festival of

Social Science. "The seminar is extremely timely and relevant to anyone who has an interest in [adoption](#) and family finding," says Dr Runswick-Cole. "It will also demonstrate the benefits of [social science](#) research in contributing to practice which enhances opportunities for children and families."

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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