

# Experiences of adoptive families inform policy recommendations

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Credit: University of East Anglia

New research from the University of East Anglia (UEA) recommends increased support for adoptive families and early intervention for those at risk of breaking down.

The study, led by the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF) at UEA, surveyed more than 300 adoptive parents to gather detailed information about how they and their most recently adopted

child were getting on.

It also aimed to measure risk and protective factors that may affect children's development, and to gain an up-to-date picture of what services families had used, wanted or needed.

Most parents (79 per cent) said their adoption was going 'really well' or they were 'managing', but in 21 per cent of families, parents were experiencing many difficulties and struggling to manage. More problems were reported by parents of older children. Even when parents felt they were 'managing', many children had emotional, behavioral or [mental health problems](#) at a clinically significant level.

Despite some problems, the vast majority of parents surveyed felt love and commitment towards their children. More than half (56 per cent) felt they had experienced more rewards than they expected prior to the adoption.

The researchers recommend that prospective adoptive parents be given full and detailed information about children's histories and likely future challenges, particularly on the specific needs of children with whom they are being considered for a match.

Other recommendations for policy and practice include:

- Reducing risks before adoption, for example through support for birth families;
- Reducing risks in the system, such as the number of moves a child has while in care;
- Early assessment of children's psychological health and [early intervention](#) if needed;
- Planning the move to adoption at the child's pace;
- Increasing availability of therapeutic support for children with

complex emotional/behavioural issues

The project was funded as part of the Department for Education's Regionalising Adoption programme, in conjunction with the new adoption group One Adoption in Yorkshire and Humberside, which commissioned the survey to inform future work with families in the region. Most of the parents (88 per cent) had adopted a child who was previously unknown to them. The children ranged in age from birth to 17.

The findings, which come during National Adoption Week, will be presented today at a One Adoption conference by lead researcher Prof Beth Neil, professor of social work at UEA. Prof Neil said the recommendations were relevant nationally and reinforce results published last month from a survey of 3000 adoptive families by Adoption UK and the BBC, which found more than a quarter of families surveyed are experiencing significant challenges.

Prof Neil said: "Adoption offers the chance of a stable [family](#) life for children in care who cannot return to their birth families. However, while most adoptions do not breakdown and most [adoptive parents](#) show great coping, resilience, love and commitment to their children, many children experience complex and enduring developmental problems for which they and their parents need vital, ongoing support.

"Especially where children have several risk factors in their backgrounds, it is important to assess children's needs at an early stage and plan in post-adoption support, providing early intervention before problems escalate. Timely and appropriate support services are needed to cater for fluctuating levels of need as well as times of crisis.

"In this survey we can see that hardly any of those families who have adopted recently are reaching crisis point, but for those who might now

is the time to intervene, be proactive and provide the services they need to stop them getting there."

Crucially, the report showed, transitions from foster care to adoptive families need careful planning, as poorly managed moves can create an additional risk for children.

Prof Neil said: "Children need to express feelings of loss and separation, to be emotionally supported through the transition, and to have an overlap in caregiving. It's important that they are not moved abruptly, as this can be particularly distressing, but that it is done at the child's pace. This can reduce the risk of them having problems later on.

"Transitions are often emotionally stressful for the adults involved too, so support is also needed for foster carers and adopters to ensure the needs of the child are kept in focus."

Sarah Johal, head of service for One Adoption West Yorkshire, welcomed the preliminary findings of the survey.

Ms Johal said: "All [adoption](#) agencies are keen to listen to the experiences of adopters, adopted young people and [parents](#) who live apart from their [children](#). We are all committed to learning about the best ways to address the challenges that they have experienced and to working with colleagues in social care, education and health to enhance future services."

**More information:** A Survey of Adoptive Families: Following up Children Adopted in the Yorkshire and Humberside Region:  
[www.uea.ac.uk/crcf](http://www.uea.ac.uk/crcf)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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