

Professor Nina Biehal

Belonging and Permanence: Outcomes in long-term foster care and adoption

Nina Biehal is Research Director of the Children and Young People's Social Work Team at the Social Policy Research Unit, University of York. Before becoming a researcher, she worked as social worker and as a residential worker. She has published on a wide range of child welfare topics, including studies of leaving care (1995), runaways from care (1998), preventive work with adolescents (2000, 2005), the reunification of children in care with their families (2006) and outcomes of long-term foster care and adoption (2010).

Nina was speaking to Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to DfE's Adoption Policy Team about the 'Characteristics, outcomes and meanings of four types of permanent placement' study. This study compared carer adoption, stranger adoption, long-term foster care and Special guardianship. The research provided new data on which children might benefit from each type of placement.

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- Mary: Nina, tell me what was, for you, the most rewarding aspect of this research?
- Nina: **Well, I think the part I found most rewarding, most enjoyable was the interviews with the children and their foster carers and adoptive parents. It was just really, really fascinating being able to explore with children, how they felt about living in their foster families, living in their adopted families, their own story of their lives and what their day to day life was like.**
And also, particularly for the children settled in stable foster care, how much they did see this as a family for life and a settled family that was going to be there for them long term. Obviously it's too early for us to know whether that will work out, but that's how they saw it and so did their foster carers and that was very, very encouraging.
- Mary: And what would you say was the most powerful finding from the project?
- Nina: **Well, for me, the most powerful finding was that the children who had managed to successfully settle in stable foster care were as likely to be doing well in terms of their current wellbeing, as the children who'd been adopted. I think that's an incredibly encouraging finding because it shows that, although there are lots of concerns about the care system, it can actually be extremely positive for many children where things do work out well.**
- Mary: And if you had to choose just one key message from the research, what would it be?
- Nina: **Well, I think it would be that care should absolutely not be viewed as a last resort. This study shows very clearly that care can be a very positive experience for children who need it, children in extreme circumstances who can't live at home can benefit enormously from being looked after just as they can benefit from being adopted.**
Of course, being looked after doesn't give children the legal security of adoption but adoption, although that's maybe desirable, isn't going to be possible or desirable for every child. To know that in those cases children have as good a chance of doing well as adopted children is very, very encouraging.
- Mary: And would you say there are particular messages for the family justice system?
- Nina: **Well, I think to reiterate what I've just said, that they should not view care as a last resort and also I think they should consider the impact of late entry to care on the chances of permanence for children. Our study and other studies before it have found that the later children entered care, the less likely they are to be adopted, have a chance of adoption and also we found that the later children went into care, the less likely they were to settle in stable foster placements. So I think the implication is that courts must avoid undue delay and move to timely decision making about permanence.**

- Mary: And any special messages for children and families social workers?
- Nina: **Well, again, quite similar messages because we know that from this study and others, that prolonged exposure to abuse and neglect can reduce children's chances of finding a stable placement and this study also showed that late entry to care was linked to much worse outcomes in terms of mental health and educational progress. So again, social workers shouldn't view care as a last resort and should think much more clearly about timely and effective decision making, both about entry to care and about planning for permanence.**
- Mary: And anything different for adoption services?
- Nina: **I think the specific thing for adoption services would be to really think about making use of foster carer adoption which can be very successful for children, just because it's building on well established relationships, where the carer and the child already love each other.**
I also think another key message is regarding the issue of ongoing support. We found that over a third of children in stable foster care and over a third of the children who had been adopted had really high levels of support needs, quite serious mental health difficulties, problems at school, a range of quite serious emotional behavioural problems. So while both adoption and long term stable foster care can be beneficial for children, a certain number of those children and the adults caring for them are likely to have ongoing support needs, even after the children have been settled for many years.
- Mary: And what about future research in the field? What do you think should happen next?
- Nina: **Well, I think we really need to know more about longer term outcomes of adoption. A lot of the older studies that have looked at this weren't based on samples of children adopted from care and there's a real need for this. We also need to know more about adoption breakdown - why it happens, in what circumstances, what we can do to support adoption better. And I think the third really outstanding issue for me would be to tease out that very difficult question that no one, as far as I'm aware, has managed to answer yet about how far it's the difficulties that children bring with them into care or is it being in care itself that can lead to poorer outcomes? We really don't know that and what's needed is a prospective study of looked after children to answer these sort of questions.**
- Mary: Thank you very much, Nina