Professor Alan Rushton

*Enhancing Adoptive Parenting:
A test of effectiveness*

Alan Rushton is Visiting Professor, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London. After taking a degree in psychology, Alan trained as a social worker and practised in the mental health field, with both children and adults, for 12 years. During this time, he became concerned about the lack of a firm evidence base in social work.

He then taught social workers for over 25 years on the MSc programme at the Institute of Psychiatry, and this quest to increase the research base, for social workers in training, became even more pressing. He conducted a number of follow-up studies of maltreated children placed late for adoption and, more recently, he has pursued the question of 'what works' in relation to adoption support. He is currently developing the adopters' parenting manuals that were used in the 'Enhancing Adoptive Parenting' study.

Alan was speaking to Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to DfE's Adoption Policy Team about the 'Enhancing adoptive parenting' study. This study evaluated two parent-support programmes using a randomised controlled trial. It explored whether either a cognitive behavioural parenting programme or an educational programme about parenting children with additional needs, (when added to the standard social work service), was more effective than the standard service alone.

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Mary: Alan, could you tell me what was the most rewarding aspect of this research project for you?

Alan: **Well, I believe the early months and years of placement where the adopters are building relationships and have to meet the challenge of often highly disturbed behaviour in the children is the time when it really counts to offer sound parenting advice. So, having the opportunity to both organise the delivery of a new parenting programme for adopters and to conduct an independent evaluation was a very exciting and also daunting opportunity.**

Mary: You've mentioned that it was daunting. What would you say was the most challenging aspect of it for you?

Alan: **I think there were lots of difficulties in actually making contact with the adopters. We had various layers of the organisation to negotiate with, all the way from the directors through to the principal officers through to the front line workers. Ideally, we would have liked to have talked straight to the adopters but that wasn't acceptable and it meant that intermediaries explained the research on our behalf. So I think, to answer your question, to get a big enough sample was the real challenge.**

Mary: And thinking of the findings, what do you think is the most powerful finding in the project?

Alan: **Well, we were trying to see whether we could modify the adoptive parenting to enhance the parenting and we were trying to see if we could modify the children's very disturbed behaviour, so I'll take them separately if you like.**

We did find it was possible to produce positive change in some aspects of the adoptive parenting. So we produced evidence that the adopters' satisfaction with parenting their child increased more in those receiving the parenting programme and in fact levels of satisfaction actually reduced in those receiving the standard service. So we do have good strong statistical evidence that there was a difference between the intervention group and the standard service group. That, we think, was our major positive finding.

The other attempt was to see whether changes in the parenting had a knock on effect to the mental health of the children. This did not show any great difference in either of the groups over time. But you have to remember that these children had very abusive histories before they came into the adoptive placements, they were late placed in their middle childhood. So, in the light of that, it was not that surprising that the problems didn't diminish significantly in a short period of time. Not to say that perhaps, had we had the chance to follow them up for longer, there might have been positive effects.

Mary: And if you had to choose one key message for practice from your findings, what would that be?

Alan: Well, we would say that this approach was highly appreciated by the adopters and did bring positive benefits and therefore needs to be more widely available. We'd like to put forward the idea that both the management of behaviour and the understanding of the problems are both important and we would do well to include both elements in a parenting programme, neither one nor the other because the adoptive parents appreciated both.

Mary: So could you highlight first of all some messages for professionals who are working in children and families social work?

Alan: Yes, I'll try. I think it needs to be said that this parenting programme was not intended to represent all aspects of adoption support, it's only a part of it. Nor will a ten week programme be all that's needed for many struggling families, so it shouldn't be seen as an all purpose intervention. Nevertheless, we are putting it forward as a parenting manual that's now tried and tested and a method that could enhance adoptive parenting and thereby secure unstable placements and hopefully prevent disruptions.

Mary: How about messages for professionals working in adoption services?

Alan: Well, some adoptive families need more than simple group support or a generalised social work support service. Some families need help in understanding the often baffling behaviour of their children and need more specific help in managing the conduct problems, emotional disregulation and attachment distortions frequently present in maltreated children. So a tailored specially devised parenting manual is, I hope, likely to be a relevant and effective contribution to the field of adoption support.

Mary: And are there messages for professionals who're involved in commissioning children's services?

Alan: Well, the voluntaries are often known for more practice innovations and greater flexibility of service delivery. So this might be an opportunity where a ten week structured parenting programme might be more easily delivered than, say, in a local authority adoption team where the pressures are such that to allocate ten weeks to a single family is often beyond their resources.

Mary: What would you say are the most important messages from your study for adoptive parents?

Alan: Well, adopters, particularly those taking children late placed from the care system have often found it very hard in the past to find relevant and effective post adoption services and often they end up struggling alone. So adopters deserve to have access to skilled and expert help and they should be prepared when they look for help to question whether or not what's being offered has evidence to support its usefulness.

Mary: What would you say are the outstanding issues for more research in this field?

Alan: **Well, I believe in continuing to test for the effectiveness of interventions. That's going to involve regular collaborations between professional researchers and service managers and practitioners and, unless we build up a platform of research based and practice related knowledge, we will fail to make progress in adoption support. There'll be a standstill for the next decade. We do need to do more.**

But what I've been looking at, parenting, is perhaps only one aspect that needs to be looked at. Various other types of intervention could well be rigorously evaluated. For example, offering group support to adopters, telephone counselling, intensive family work, parent and child work, individual child therapy, maybe work with very difficult relationships within sibling groups. So there's still much more to be done and it would be nice to see a programme of evaluating many other aspects of adoption support apart from just parenting programmes.

Mary: Thank you very much, Alan.