

Dr Elsbeth Neil

Helping Birth Families: Services, Costs and Outcomes

Beth Neil is a Senior Lecturer in social work in the School of Social Work and Psychology at the University of East Anglia. After her undergraduate degree in Psychology, Beth worked for several years in social care, then went to UEA in 1992 to study for her master's degree in social work. After two years in child care practice, she returned to UEA in 1996 to undertake her PhD on the topic of contact after adoption. Since then, Beth has continued to research in this field, exploring the perspectives of adoptive parents, adopted children and birth relatives, using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Beth was interviewed by Mary Beek, Professional Adviser to DfE's Adoption Policy Team about the 'Helping birth families' study. This was an in depth study of support services to birth relatives, their costs and outcomes.

The full report *Helping Birth Families: Services, Costs and Outcomes* written by Elsbeth Neil, Jeanette Cossar, Paula Lorgelly and Julie Young is published by BAAF.

- Mary: Beth, what would you say was the most rewarding part of the birth parent project for you?
- Beth: I think, for me, it was the work we did involving birth parents actually in the research process. So this is something we started right at the beginning of the project, we recruited a number of birth parents, and we asked them to help us with how to get the approach right to our participants, how to encourage people to want to be in our study. Later on, how to make sense of the data we got, how to formulate our messages for practice, how to get our message across. And this was just a really great part of the research process. It helped us, for example, to get our message across at our launch conference. We had birth parents speaking on a DVD, we had birth parents taking part in the conference, answering questions from the floor. It really kept our study grounded in birth parents' experiences.**
- Mary: Yes, and the challenges? What would you say were the biggest challenges for you?
- Beth: Well, I think it was challenging to involve birth parents in the research interviews in particular because we were looking for people who were going through the adoption process or who had recently been through the adoption process. We were trying to get people at the crisis point in their lives and that did require great persistence, you know. There were a lot of birth parents who we had to phone not just once, not just twice, but three or four or five times, we went to visit them, they weren't in, we had to go back, but we did achieve it.**
- Mary: And in terms of the findings, what would you say was the most powerful finding from the project?
- Beth: One of our main messages really is the need for a very proactive outreach type approach with birth parents. You know, an office based, by appointment, counselling model doesn't really work very well with this group of people at this time in their lives. And people really do need more of what I'd call a social case work type approach. Just somebody to get in there, get alongside them, go places with them, help them with practical issues as well as the emotional side of it, as well as the counselling. And for some people, maybe the emotional side and the counselling side needs to come a bit later on, maybe after the adoption or when they've established a trust in you as a worker.**
- Mary: What about the messages for professionals from the project? First of all, what about the family justice system?

Beth: Well, I think that the more people who can try and point birth parents to support services and encourage them to use support services, the better because what we found as the key challenge in this area is actually getting people to use the services. If they use it, generally we found people found it very, very helpful and it seemed to make a difference to them but the take up is quite poor. Often, they won't listen to the social worker because they're head to head with them. So I think people in the family justice system could ask questions about has the birth parent been offered independent support, to double check that has happened.

Mary: What about children and families social workers? What would you say were the messages for them?

Beth: Well, what we saw in a lot of cases is how people's relationships with their child's social worker went into a downward spiral. This was precipitated sometimes by the initial removal of the child or the making of the adoption plan. This would push a lot of birth parents into a state of crisis where they would become disturbed in their thinking, disturbed in their feelings, disturbed in their behaviour. And things just went from bad to worse. People described how they stopped being invited to meetings, they stopped being consulted, they were not allowed to meet adoptive parents because of this angry behaviour they'd shown.

So I think it's very, very difficult, but somehow this downward spiral has to be interrupted. I think we have to find a way of standing back and thinking about why is the parent doing this, trying to get those independent support workers in as early as possible to stop these downward spirals and try to remain committed to treating people fairly, openly, with respect throughout the adoption process.

Mary: And would you say there are different messages for adoption services or the same?

Beth: Well, a lot of birth parents see the adoption team somewhat differently to the child social work team. So the adoption team maybe have an important role in, again, getting in early, trying to get birth parents onside, interrupting these downward spirals. I think even when birth parent support services are contracted out to the independent sector, the adoption team have an important role to play because they've got the information about what's happening in the process, what stage things are at, what the plan is, how the plan is going to unfold. So I think they can't ever just step back and say somebody else is doing the birth parent support.

- Mary: And what about commissioners of services?
- Beth: **Well, I think our study does really show the importance of the services that are provided in the independent sector. Birth parents really, really valued getting the support from another agency. They are so suspicious of just the word social services or children's services. So it made a very, very big difference and enabled a lot of parents to trust their support worker if that person was working for a different organisation. So I think we do need to keep looking at these partnerships and looking at funding these independent arrangements.**
- Mary: So how about messages from the study for birth relatives, Beth? What would you say?
- Beth: **Well, I would just want to encourage people whose children are being adopted to use independent support services because, you know, the vast majority of people we spoke to who would use the services found them valuable. They felt supported, it helped them to feel better and, actually, we saw measurable improvements in people. So I think it's a very big barrier for people to take that step and trust somebody but people who've taken that step are pretty positive about it.**
- Mary: And for further research, do you have any thoughts about what should happen next in terms of research in this field?
- Beth: **Well, one thing that we didn't do in our study is really compare very specific therapeutic interventions. This is largely because we didn't find these services were on offer. But, you know, as the field evolves, if agencies start to develop more specialist therapeutic models, then obviously it would be good to compare those types of models versus a general casework service.**
- Mary: Yes, thank you very much.