

## Patricia McGinty

Patricia McGinty is a Child Placement Consultant who works on BAAF's family finding publications, Be My Parent newspaper and Be My Parent online. She was speaking to Caroline Thomas, Academic Adviser to the ARi about some of the family finding practice issues that were raised by the studies.

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Caroline: So in your experience, which groups of children would you say are waiting the longest for placement?

Patricia: **There are several groups of children that tend to wait longer for a permanent family through adoption or permanent fostering - black and minority ethnic children; sibling groups, particularly where there are three or more children; disabled children; children with a complex medical background or whose development may be uncertain, and increasingly, children with pre-natal exposure to drugs or alcohol.**

**Older children may also wait longer before they're adopted or placed with a permanent family. In terms of adoption particularly, children over the age of five-to-seven years and boys tend to receive fewer enquiries than girls, irrespective of their ethnic background.**

**We also need to consider that children can be in more than one of these groups and be doubly, or trebly disadvantaged in terms of family finding.**

Caroline: Are there are particular trends for black and minority ethnic children?

Patricia: **Yes. We've noticed that enquiries from prospective adopters for black and minority ethnic children significantly decline for children after the age of three years. In comparison to children of a white background this happens at about age of five to seven years.**

**If we look at Be My Parent and our patterns of referrals and enquiries, and also at the Adoption Register around 30% of children are referred from a black and minority ethnic background.**

**Boys of all ethnic backgrounds also tend to receive fewer enquiries than girls and particularly for boys of black African or Caribbean heritage or who are of mixed ethnicity needing adoption.**

**We've also noticed an increase in children referred to Be My Parent who originate from Eastern European countries and some African countries such as Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo.**

**And there has also been an increase in children referred with more complex ethnicities and sibling groups where one child maybe is white and they have a sibling of mixed ethnicity.**

Caroline: Tell me now a bit about the profiling work you do.

Patricia: **A profile, in summary, is a brief description of the child's personality and needs that's published to recruit new families when their birth parents or birth families can no longer look after them. And we know that it's important to include a photograph where possible.**

Profiles increasingly nowadays include multiple photos and film clips, with the technology we now have, of the child. And they're very powerful and they're particularly powerful in helping to profile disabled children or children with more complex needs where that information may be more difficult to communicate in the printed word. And profiles where there are film clips and photos and additional information often give prospective families a greater sense of the child's personality and needs to help them to make an enquiry.

Other powerful materials may also include a child's drawings that again communicate a sense of who they are.

**Caroline:** In your view, what makes a good profile for a child who's waiting for a placement?

**Patricia:** A good profile maximises a child's placement opportunities for a permanent family. We need to welcome families and to value the skills and qualities they may have to offer in caring for a child. Profiling simply isn't about filtering families out – it's about welcoming them in. And we may need to consider many prospective adopters and foster carers who may have transferable skills from other areas of their lives.

We also need to consider that in February 2011 revised Adoption Guidance was implemented for England, and this had an impact on matching and proposing a placement in respect of family finding for children and also had implications for the way we profile children in Be My Parent for agencies in England.

To comply with that guidance Be my Parent now profiles all children as needing a one or two parent family which can reflect or actively develop the child's ethnic and cultural heritage.

To develop a good profile you need to know the child well. And it should be based on robust assessments around the child's personality, their educational, social and emotional development and any medical needs that the child may have as well as their own wishes and feelings. And where possible its good practice that the child should be involved in their profile. Foster carers and significant others such as the school or any specialists involved in the child's life should also be able to contribute.

The profile needs to be rounded. It shouldn't be overly positive or overly negative, or too detailed or too vague. Profiles shouldn't raise expectations or overwhelm the enquirer. And certainly the wording shouldn't create any misunderstandings. And carers shouldn't have to second guess about what a certain piece of information may mean.

When you're featuring sibling groups, try to profile each child individually as well as reflect the information about their relationship and as a sibling group.

The language in the profile should be clear. In developing profiles you've got to be sure to avoid social work jargon. For example, terms such as 're-parenting'. Not all prospective families may understand what that means. Or 'therapeutic support' – be clear about what may be involved.

In terms of medical information, keep the terminology simple and specify what particular medical conditions or disabilities may mean for a particular child. For example, for cerebral palsy, give an example of how the child's affected rather than just a description of the condition itself.

The same applies to disability, as I've said, and use the social model of disability where possible. Look at what the child can do rather than focusing on what they're unable to do.

We also need to respect the confidentiality and privacy of the child and their birth family. And where possible to avoid the publication of identifying sensitive information or third party information about the child including what a particular birth parent may have done to harm them, including experiences of abuse or soiling or wetting, so that birth parents don't feel publicly blamed in the public domain. And the child doesn't feel embarrassed about what may have been said about them at a particular stage of in their life.

Caroline: I'm sure that's really important.

Patricia: Absolutely. You can explain this in the details and particular issues to appropriate families once they've made an enquiry.

If a child can't communicate using verbal language, maybe explain in your profile how a child can communicate through sounds or body language or sign language. And where possible also include details of support, including possible adoption financial support if that may be available.

In terms of contact, avoid overly prescriptive or complex contact arrangements and if the child's ethnicity is unknown, avoid DNA testing for ethnicity which we know doesn't provide reliable information about the child's ethnicity, culture or religion, or attribute that information to a particular parent.

A good profile will only be as effective in family finding for the children in terms of your follow up service that your agency can offer. In Be My Parent, we advise that you follow up enquiries within seven days and that if, as the social worker, you're not going to be available, that a colleague or somebody else in the office can up those enquiries. When a family makes an enquiry they make a huge emotional investment in terms of their hopes, about what enquiring about the children and the possibility of that child being part of that family. Families can be easily put off or discouraged if you don't return their enquiries or respond promptly.

Caroline: OK. And what can really help to maximise a child's chances of being placed in a family?

Patricia: There are a number of factors to consider. Firstly, it's important to avoid sequential family finding mechanisms that can contribute to delay. So, for example, looking in house first, working out whether or not there has been any success in that area and then moving on to other areas of family finding. Try to use as many mechanisms as possible at the same time to minimise delay.

And also welcome families from a wide geographical area rather than your locality or particular region. It's also important to consider prospective families from all agencies, including local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and independent fostering agencies too. And consider families at all stages of the adoption and fostering process.

When preparing prospective permanent families, it's also important that we educate them on the kinds of children that wait the longest. This may help some of these families to then consider older children or perhaps a larger sibling groups or disabled children too.

For some children needing adoption, sadly they may not receive any adoption enquiries at all but they may receive enquiries from prospective foster carers. So it's important not to rule them out either because they may be considered as a suitable family in the future. You may also wish to consider special guardianship for some of these permanent foster carers that have come forward once the placement has taken place.

Also avoid profiling with a narrow focus on traditional two parent family models with a mum and a dad and avoid requesting experience of disability or parenting experience. As I've said already, some families may have transferable skills from another area.

It's also important to avoid a narrow specification of the family's ethnicity and if you're recruiting within particular communities within the black minority ethnic community, it's important to know the child's community and ethnicity. Explore the media that they use to communicate. How does the community meet? How do they communicate with each other? It's also important to value families of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds to the child's who may still be able to meet that child's needs through their support network or other significant knowledge and connections.

Caroline: Would you have one final message, Patricia, for good practice in family finding, particularly for black and minority ethnic children?

Patricia: Yes. I'd like to end with saying that all of our prospective families are a precious resource. And let's value all of our families in terms of how they present, including the skills they have to offer, their ethnic diversity, their family composition and the support they need to effectively care for our looked after children.

Caroline: Thanks very much.

Patricia: Thank you.