

Introduction

This book began with funding from the Department for Education's Sector Capacity Building Initiative (SCB) to look at sharing good practice among voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs).* As part of the capacity building programme, good practice was identified in bringing together adopted children and young people in groups, providing an opportunity for them to express their emotions and share their experiences with others from similar backgrounds. This book was commissioned to share such practice in any agencies in a good practice guide, and additional work was undertaken to look in depth at the work of a number of VAAs, whose staff came forward to speak about their group work. In addition, the remit was broadened to recognise the contribution of local authorities (LAs) to group work and a survey was carried out, with a number of interviews conducted with LAs. Information from the VAA interviews and LA survey has been used to inform this guide, although the nature of the project, which was designed to focus on VAAs, means that there is a larger amount of information about VAA group work, serving as examples and catalysts for national service development.

WHY GROUP WORK?

Every year, several thousand children in the UK are adopted from care by people who are not family members. Approximately three-quarters of those children will be aged between one and four, and nearly 20 per cent aged between five and nine. It could be argued that all of these children are likely to have some complex needs, not only because of possible neglect, abuse or pre-natal exposure to alcohol or drugs, and the attachment and separation issues they have experienced, but also because of the identity issues they face as they grow up in a family into which they were not born.

Support will be important for all of these children, in varying ways, as they come to terms with their adoptive status and with any issues this raises for them – which are likely to change as they grow and develop. This support can come from many different sources, including:

* The Sector Capacity Building Initiative (SCB) was launched by the Department for Education in 2014, and overseen by the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA), with the aims of increasing VAA capacity and supporting their growth and development.

- the support of their adoptive family;
- post-adoption support by social workers, for instance, in undertaking life story work;
- support from therapists, counsellors and other professionals;
- group support, either formally or informally arranged.

We owe it to these children and families to provide all the support we can. Group support is one of the most powerful and impactful tools we have available.

LEARNING FROM CURRENT GROUP WORK

This guide is written to distil the good practice issues from a number of children's groups and other projects whose staff volunteered to be interviewed. What became very clear during these interviews was that no group is the same. Every group interviewed had been set up with slightly different aims and objectives, and it was widely acknowledged that they had learnt from experience – from previous work, but also from listening to children and young people – and had refined aspects of their group in response to this. This means that no single, complete good practice model exists, as each group will depend on its members and individual situation. However, we have identified a range of good practice points, from a varied selection of groups undertaking imaginative and useful work, and these are presented in this guide, to provide inspiration for others working in this area.

Much of this work has been developed by staff with many years' experience in the adoption field, and often with therapeutic knowledge of the needs of children and families. What "works" has in almost all cases been defined by the feedback from adopted children and young people themselves, and also from their families, schools and others who have seen positive outcomes from their involvement in group activities with their adoption agency.

DEFINITIONS OF GROUPS

It was clear from conducting interviews for this guide that the term "group" is applied widely and variously across the adoption support sector. This guide therefore covers a range of activities that bring together adopted children and young people – sometimes with, and sometimes without, their adoptive parents.

Groups working with adopted children usually have one or more of the objectives below:

- Providing a “safe space” for adopted children and young people to meet with one another, where they may also share experiences and gain insights and support.
- Providing access to leisure and creative activities that they might not be able to access in other parts of their lives.
- Focusing on a structured purpose that brings children and young people together for learning and life skills.
- Providing opportunities for consultation, ambassadorial roles and personal development, and to inform and improve adoption practice.

AIMS OF GROUP WORK

Some groups were established with definite purposes – such as consultation, or to enable young people to act as ambassadors for other adopted young people by sharing their own feelings and experiences. Other groups were set up with more general aims of supporting and empowering children and young people, and it was decided to let the group members define how the group evolved. In all situations, staff were aware that in order to offer the flexibility and responsiveness that adopted children and young people needed, it was important to have a secure underpinning structure to the group that enabled participants to feel safe and supported. This was especially important as the group work was frequently targeted at families who were already experiencing problems, and the group was often part of a package of wider support.

MEASURING SUCCESS IN GROUP WORK

Measuring success in group work is not easy, because there are often other factors at play. Many of these projects were working with the children or young people and their families before they started attending the groups, or had set up the groups to complement their existing work. Consequently, any outcomes had to be measured alongside their other work. But most projects asked for regular feedback from the children/young people (and their parents, where appropriate). This tended to take place either at the end of each group session, or through special consultation events held at the start or end of a new “round” of groups. This pattern of “evaluation” through regular feedback reflected what has been explored in related literature and research on children’s groups (see Chapters 1 and 2 for more information).

THE SCOPE OF THIS GUIDE

There is already a great deal of material available about how to run children's groups and many readers of this guide will have experience of social work or therapeutic work with adoptive families, or specialist youth work with young people. Therefore, this is not a "how to" guide about the day-to-day running of a group, but sets out to explore the range of possible purposes of groups, what they can achieve for children/young people, and the practical issues you need to consider if you are thinking of setting up group work with adopted children. The guide also highlights good practice from existing groups, presenting a range of key messages collected from the cumulative experience of those interviewed for this guide.

A number of case studies from a range of groups are included as an appendix. These have been selected to illustrate a variety of group objectives, memberships and operating conditions, and cover:

- AdCAMHS – East Sussex County Council/Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
- Faith in Families
- West London Adoption & Permanence Consortium Children's Group
- TalkAdoption North East
- The Adoptables, Coram

Space considerations mean that we are unable to show more than this snapshot of practice from the range of work being undertaken by many dedicated groups, but we hope this selection provides inspiration for what can be achieved.

Legislation quoted within this guide relates solely to England. However, the focus throughout the guide is on practical issues to do with group work, and will therefore be generally relevant UK-wide.

The term "participant" is used in this guide to describe children and young people who are taking part in groups. It does not necessarily mean that they are taking part in "participation" activities, in the frequently used terminology of children's rights and empowerment, and the use of consultation to develop and improve services.