

PROVIDING LONG-TERM SUBSTITUTE CARE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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SITUATION IN ENGLAND

- New right-wing coalition government
- Concern about young children in care in need of long-term placements

EVIDENCE

- For some young children, prospects for reunification with birth family is poor despite rehabilitative work
- There is a group whose birth parents are indifferent, neglectful and unlikely to change
- Adoption from care is falling and many adoptive parents complain about the long and bureaucratic process, and some go overseas for children.

THE PROBLEM

- 5,000 children under age 1 entering care each year, one-third on a legal care/protection order
- Probably 1,000 unlikely to return to their birth family in the foreseeable future
- Some horrible murders of children left at home in dangerous situations

SOLUTIONS

- Long-term foster care
- Adoption by relatives
- Adoption by strangers
- Kinship care
- Special guardianship
- Concurrent planning

- **THE GOVERNMENT WANTS MORE ADOPTION BY STRANGERS - as research suggests good outcomes for these children**

RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Consideration of long-term placement comes late after admission
- Most social work is about contact with birth family with hope of return
- Conflict between establishing legal security and ensuring care by committed people
- Sibling complexities
- By the time long-term care placement becomes an issue - lots of people involved.

WHAT WOULD HELP - 1

- Better availability and use of information -e.g. government has published league tables on rates of adoption by local authorities - are these misleading?
- consider statistics on all possible options - e.g. adoptions fall but special guardianship rises, so a combination presents a different picture from the league tables
- Calculate use of options based on children who are eligible - not the overall population

WHAT WOULD HELP -2

Reform the legal system

- Less cumbersome process
- Quicker
- Fewer experts and court adjournments
- Resolve tension between rights of birth families and welfare rights of child

WHAT WOULD HELP -3

- Clearer wording to describe what children need - e.g. terms like: attachment, identity, matching, permanency
- Reconsider concept of permanency

PERMANENCY

What does it mean?

- Nothing is 'permanent' in life - so does it apply in periods of life, not throughout?
- Is it a secure base to leave and return
- Can it only be provided in a family?
- What does it mean for older children?
- How does it match with other concepts - commitment, availability, benevolence, predictability, secure base, being wanted?

FINAL COMMENT

Too rigid a view on the best option for all children in need of long-term placement is likely to produce a poor decision.

- There is likely consensus about what the young children need
- We need to articulate this and then think of words to describe it, NOT THE REVERSE.
- Just as we need to disaggregate statistics, we need to disaggregate language!