Belonging and permanence in long-term foster care

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The context: family placement in England

- Most children are fostered by carers outside their family
  - Only 11% of fostered children live with relatives

- There are various types of foster care
  - e.g. long-term, short–term, specialist

- This talk is about long-term foster care
  - Definition of 'long-term': 3 or more years with same carer
  - Less than ¼ of all children in care in England stay 3+ years

- Some children leave care and move to other types of permanent placements:
  - Adoption by strangers or by foster carers
  - Residence Orders
  - Special Guardianship Orders

Some questions about long-term foster care

1. Stability (*objective* permanence)

- Can foster care offer stability?
- How do foster placements become permanent?
- Are there any differences between children in stable, long-term foster placements and those who experience unstable care?

2. Ideas of family and belonging (*subjective* permanence)

- Can children in long-term foster homes experience a sense of belonging and sense of permanence?
- In what circumstances does this happen?

Research design

Study of children in long-term care in 7 English local authorities

1. ***Survey***
   - ◆ **196** children in same foster placement for 3+ years
   - ◆ Surveyed 7 or more years after entry to that foster placement

   Postal questionnaires to adopters/foster carers & social workers.

2. ***Qualitative study***
   - ◆ **37** children and their foster carers/adoptive parents
     Semi-structured interviews.

3. ***Policy study***
   Focus groups and interviews with managers, social workers, foster carers and adopters.

Survey of children in long-term foster care

The *survey sample*

- **196** children who were in foster care in 1998/99 *and*
- 3 years later (in 2001/2002), were either:
  - Still living with the same foster carers *or*
  - Adopted (by their foster carers or by strangers)

Our survey of foster carers and social workers asked:
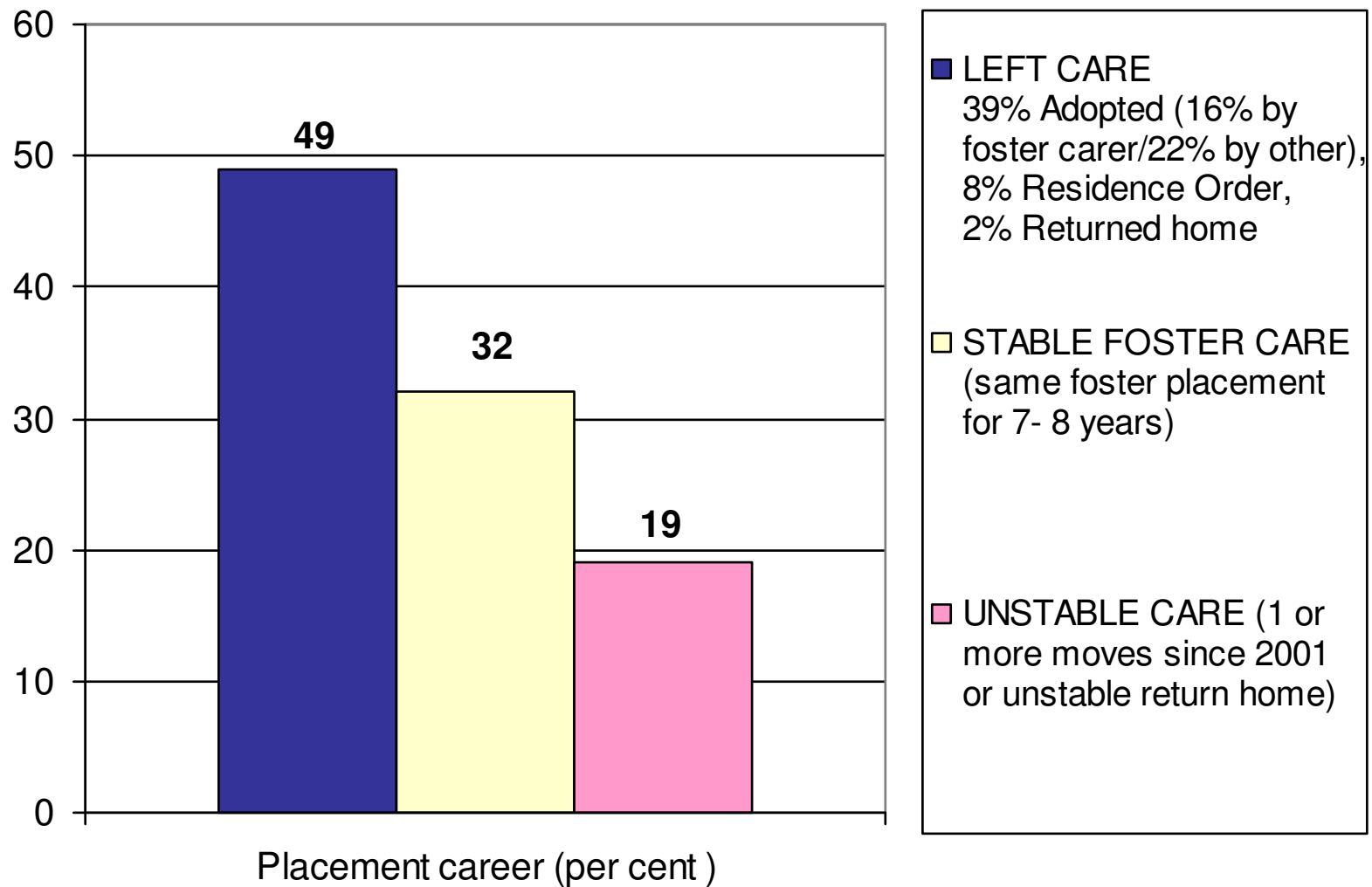- What had happened by 2006 (7- 8 years later)?

The *York sample* (part of the *survey sample*)

- **90** of the children in our survey had also been included in two earlier surveys*
- We had data from 1998 & 2001 on these children

* Studies by Ian Sinclair and colleagues

Objective permanence
What had happened by 7- 8 year follow-up?

LEFT CARE
39% Adopted (16% by foster carer/22% by other), 8% Residence Order, 2% Returned home

STABLE FOSTER CARE (same foster placement for 7- 8 years)

UNSTABLE CARE (1 or more moves since 2001 or unstable return home)

Placement career (per cent)

Who were the children living with?

- **Relatives**   **22%**
  - *Fostered*   *16%*
  - *Residence Order*   *5%*
  - *Adopted (1 child)*   *<1%*

- **Former foster carers**   **18%**
  - *Adopted by foster carers*   *16%*
  - *Residence Orders*   *2%*

- **'Stranger' adopters**   **22%**

- **Non-relative carers**   **38%**
  - *foster carers*   *33%*
  - *In residential care*   *5%*

Planning for permanence

How did the stable foster placements become permanent?

1. **Some placements were planned to be permanent from the start**

   ◆ Only half of stable foster placements (or placements with foster carers who then adopted the child) were *originally* planned to be long-term

2. **Other placements became permanent as time passed**

   ◆ Plan for child changed

   ◆ Carers grew to love child, wanted to protect them

   ◆ Development of strong bond overrode social work concerns about match between child and carer

Objective permanence in long-term foster care and adoption
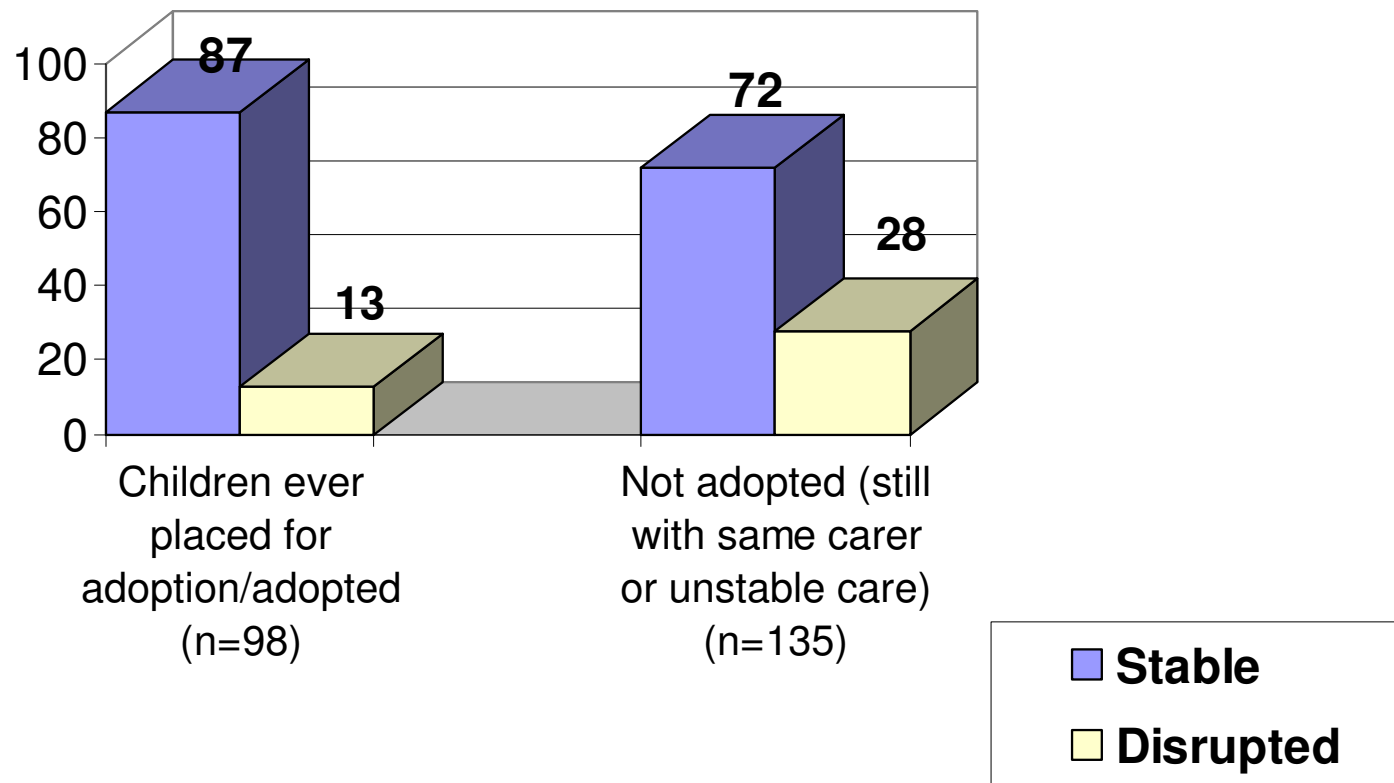
Children in stable foster care/unstable care

	Stable foster care *(same foster home for 7 - 8 years)*	Unstable care *(left foster home after 3 or more years)*
Mean age at entry to care *Years*	3.9	5.3
Mean age at survey *Years*	13.4	14.4

Emotional and behavioural difficulties (SDQ)

Measured emotional and behavioural difficulties using SDQ

- Scores were above clinical threshold for more children in unstable care group (50%) than those in stable foster care group (36%)
- Average scores on SDQ were higher (worse) for unstable care group than for stable foster care group

- SDQ scores on sub-sample for 1998, 2001 & 2006 (n=90)
  - Overall, 65% had little/no change in scores over time
  - Unstable care group *already* had higher scores in 1998 & 2001, as well as in 2006 (but numbers small, so only indicative)

- To what extent is placement instability due to the mental health difficulties children bring with them into care?

- To what extent does instability in care create or reinforce these difficulties?

Predicting stability and change

Placement stability in foster care was predicted by:

1. ### Age at entry to care *(p=.05)*
   - those who entered care at an older age were more likely to experience unstable care
   - Other studies show that a longer period of exposure to adversity can reduce children's ability to recover from abuse or neglect *(e.g. Rutter)*

2. ### Severity of emotional and behavioural difficulties 5 years earlier *(p=.035)*
   - Those whose long-term foster placements had ended *already* had worse scores on the SDQ than those who remained in stable foster care *(Note: numbers small)*

3. ### Local authority *(p=.005)*
   - Variations in local policy and practice affecting age at entry, care planning, support to carers and children

Why did the unstable group leave their long-term foster placements?

◆ Child's behaviour

◆ Child mental health difficulties

  ◆ Worse scores for mental health difficulties (on SDQ)
  ◆ Worse SDQ scores 5 and 8 years earlier *(York sub-sample)*

◆ Carer-related reasons

  ◆ Allegations of carer abuse (14% of unstable group)
  ◆ Confirmed abuse by foster carers (14% of unstable group)
  ◆ Carer life events (marriage breakdown, domestic violence, bereavement)

◆ Often both carer-related and child-related reasons

◆ Could social workers have planned and supported these placements better?

Aspects of permanence in long-term foster care (from Sinclair et al 2005)

◆ Objective
  ◆ Child is settled in placement long-term

◆ Subjective
  ◆ Perceptions of permanence and belonging by child and carer

◆ Uncontested
  ◆ Where a *modus vivendi* has been reached between child, foster carers and parents

◆ Enacted
  ◆ Where all behave as if:
    ◆ child is 'part of the family'
    ◆ foster family is a 'family for life'

Subjective permanence
Perceptions of family and belonging

◆ What was the nature of children's contact with their birth families?

◆ How did the children feel about their families and about contact with them?

◆ In what circumstances did children feel a secure sense of belonging and permanence within their foster families?

Contact with birth families
Per cent of group

	Stable foster care	Unstable care
Face to face: with either parent	77	86
With mother: at least monthly	31	37
Face to face: with siblings	86	97
Indirect contact Eg phone, texts, cards	86	97

Quality of contact with parents: views of foster carers

'To a large extent'

◆ Overall, contact was a positive experience   51%

◆ Problems over regularity of contact   11%

◆ Child upset by irregularity of contact   13%

◆ Exposed to serious risk during contact   10%

Children's views of contact with families

Children's feelings about contact were linked to:

- how they made sense of parents' past and recent behaviour

- to some extent, to carers' attitudes to contact

- age at separation from parents:

  - Children separated when very young rarely longed for contact

  - Some children separated at an older age were happy with the contact they had, others yearned to see parents, others were angry with them.

Stable foster care
Did children 'belong' in their foster families?

◆ *Perceptions* of belonging and permanence

◆ Interviews with 12 children and carers revealed four broad patterns:

1. Primary identification with foster family (3)

2. Child reconciles belonging to two families (3)

3. Qualified sense of belonging (5)

4. Provisional belonging (1)

1. Primary identification with foster family

I belong to you and you belong to me

- Child placed with carer when very young (age 1-4)
- No contact with parents for many years
- Some children remembered no other home
- Carers had sense of entitlement to parent child
- Child's perception of carer's role as 'parent' mirrored the carer's view
- Some anxiety and emotional conflict regarding birth parents, ambivalence for some children
- But child identified principally with foster family *'as if'* they were parents

2. Belonging to two families reconciled

◆ Joined foster family at age 5-9 years (7-10 years ago)

◆ Regular, mainly satisfactory contact with parents

◆ Enacted permanence: child perceived as part of the foster family

◆ Child's temperament helped: was able to 'fit in'

◆ Children accepting or ambivalent about separation from parents, but showed no desire to return to them

◆ Child's acceptance of belonging to two families

◆ Strong identification with foster family: carers perceived as *'just like'* parents, a 'family for life.'

3. Qualified sense of belonging

- Joined foster family at age 2-7 (7-11 years ago)
- Birth parents often unreliable or rejecting
- Most had some contact with parents
- But contact was intermittent, unsatisfactory
- Feelings of hurt, anger, ambivalence to parent
- Carer committed, but child ambivalent to carer
- Settled, but troubled by conflicts of loyalty
- *But* nevertheless felt that this would be a permanent home for them and foster carers would be a 'family for life'

Provisional belonging (one child)

- In and out of care from age 1-5 (with carer 7 years)

- Attachment disorder and serious behaviour problems

- Carer stress: child behaviour + husband died

- Child wants to stay, carer now ambivalent

- Mixed messages about permanence of this placement from mother, carer and social worker

Ideas of 'family' and 'belonging'

◆ Ideas about 'family' and 'belonging' were complex and could shift over time

◆ Some children were preoccupied with birth parents
  - 55% of those in stable foster care
  - 73% of those with history of unstable care

◆ A key factor in sense of belonging was way child located foster family in relation to birth family

  - Feelings of hurt, anger, ambivalence about parents sometimes linked to ambivalence towards carers

  - 'Chemistry' between child and carer and carer's love/ commitment to child despite difficulties were also key.

◆ also

Family boundaries for children in stable foster care

◆ Where children perceived they 'belonged' to foster family and thought it would be a 'family for life:
  - ◆ Were physically and/or emotionally distanced from parents
  - ◆ *OR* could reconcile belonging to two families
  - ◆ contact with parents relatively unproblematic, or had no contact

◆ Where negotiating the boundaries between the two families was difficult for children:
  - ◆ Children were often ambivalent about parents *and/or*
  - ◆ pre-occupied with unreliable, rejecting or dangerous parents
  - ◆ Difficult for these children to identify with foster family and feel emotionally secure
  - ◆ Were troubled about where they belonged

Family boundary ambiguity

Family boundary ambiguity: a key family member is *physically* absent but *psychologically* present (family systems theory)

◆ Some parents were physically present (in contact), but unreliable or rejecting, so their psychological presence was troubling

◆ How far can fostered children mentally process their experience and knowledge of parents?

  ◆ How does their 'story' explaining parents' past and current actions represent their parents and themselves?

◆ How far can they resolve complicated feelings about parents who have harmed or rejected them, and settle for permanence in another family?

◆ Can they find a way to identify with and 'belong' both families?

Permanence and belonging in long-term foster care

1. Objective permanence

- Long-term foster care *can* offer stability, but often it does not
  - 28% of children left foster placements they had lived in for 3 or more years (unstable care group)
- Instability was related to:
  - child's emotional and behavioural difficulties, carer stress, carers' feelings about child, social work planning

2. Subjective permanence

- Children in stable foster care mostly settled and doing well
- Some felt a sense of belonging and emotional security in foster families, others more ambivalent
- Subjective perceptions of belonging and permanence were related to:
  - Age child joined the foster family
  - Child's understanding of parents' actions
  - Nature of contact with parents, if any
  - Carers' enactment of permanence

References

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