

a happier transition



Child psychotherapist Sophie Boswell talks to **David Eggboro** about research she and her colleagues carried out which highlights a serious problem with the way some children are moved on from foster care

A child who is quiet and compliant during a big change in their life may be not actually be fine – they may be hiding deep feelings of pain and loss which too often go unrecognised.

This phenomenon provided the foundation for a recent piece of research by child psychotherapists, Sophie Boswell and Lynne Cudmore, which examines what happens to some children when they are moved from foster care into adoptive families.

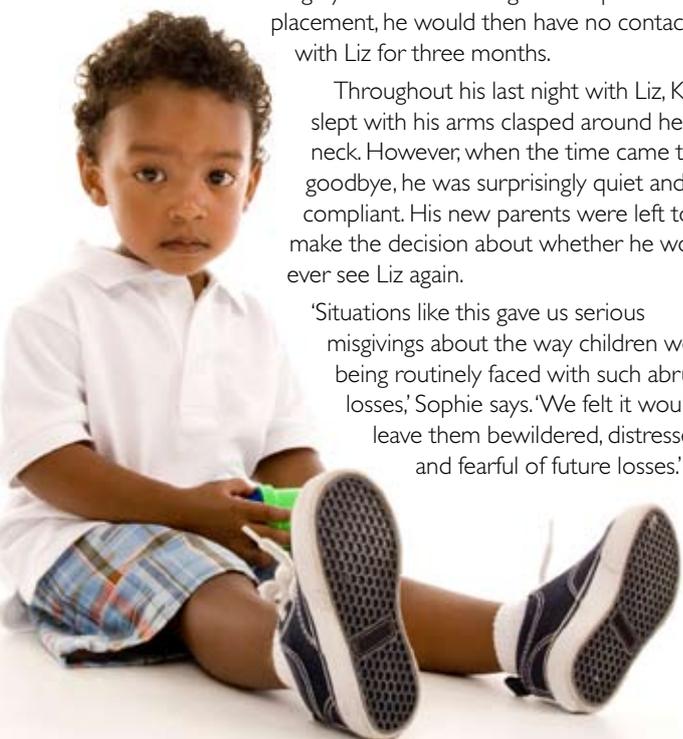
‘One group of children who caused concern were those who were settled and attached in foster care placements but approved for adoption,’ Sophie says. ‘There was anxiety about how painful this loss might be for the children, and how best to help them and their carers manage it.’

One of their first such cases was Kyle (not his real name): Kyle was placed with his carer, Liz, at a few weeks old. A deep bond grew between them, and he clearly felt safe and loved. When he was three, adoptive parents were found for him. However, amid the excitement, both Kyle’s social worker and Liz expressed great anxiety about how he would cope with the separation.

Despite these worries it was decided that Kyle would move just 10 days after meeting his new parents and, to avoid confusing Kyle or undermining the adoptive placement, he would then have no contact with Liz for three months.

Throughout his last night with Liz, Kyle slept with his arms clasped around her neck. However, when the time came to say goodbye, he was surprisingly quiet and compliant. His new parents were left to make the decision about whether he would ever see Liz again.

‘Situations like this gave us serious misgivings about the way children were being routinely faced with such abrupt losses,’ Sophie says. ‘We felt it would leave them bewildered, distressed and fearful of future losses.’



Avoiding the blind spots

This prompted Sophie and Lynne’s research, carried out with two social work colleagues. *‘The Children Were Fine’: Acknowledging Complex Feelings in the Move from Foster Care into Adoption* was first published in BAAF’s Adoption & Fostering journal in March 2014.

The research found that adults involved in the adoption process, despite their best intentions, were unable to identify the children’s distress because the children usually withdrew into a compliant state which adults took as evidence that they were fine. Sophie explains: ‘This “blind spot” is particularly prevalent where the adults themselves are dealing with huge amounts of stress.’

Their recommendation is for current policies to be brought in line with attachment theory. Wherever possible, the relationship between child and carer should be maintained and supported throughout the transition, and at least until the child has begun to settle and feel safe within their new family. They believe that more thoughtful transitions will be less traumatic for children and provide a better foundation for new relationships.

In Kyle’s case the adopters did arrange contact with Liz and went on to build up a positive relationship with her which continues today.

You can read about Sophie and Lynne’s research at www.thechildrenwerfine.co.uk

Keep Connected

Maintaining Relationships When Moving On



Vicki Swain
January 2016

The Fostering Network

Keep Connected is The Fostering Network’s campaign about the importance of maintaining relationships between looked after children and their former foster carers. We are calling on the UK’s governments to develop guidance and regulations to help fostering services support this bond when children move to another home. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/keep-connected