

Research



How practitioners can improve the way they work together in planning, supporting and facilitating the introductions process between adoptive parent(s) and their children



Sharing our experience

Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

PLR0809/109



This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

PLR0809/109

How practitioners can improve the way they work together in planning, supporting and facilitating the introductions process between adoptive parent(s) and their children?

Pollination Campaigns

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Abstract

The introductions process is the short time in which the prospective adoptive parents and children meet for the first time and start to get to know each other. It is also when the parents get to find out about the child's routine before taking them to live in their new home.

This research explores the experiences of foster carers and prospective adoptive parents during the introductions process. It has been undertaken to help improve the way practitioners work together in planning, supporting and facilitating the introductions process between adoptive parents and their children.

The aims of the research were

- to investigate what helps to ensure the best experience and outcomes of an introductions process
- to investigate ways in which integrated planning has contributed to making this process as easy and rewarding as possible for the families and carers involved
- to make recommendations to support the spread of good practice in integrated working.

Key findings include:

- A need for an increasingly integrated approach to ensure that everyone involved knows what to expect during the process and how it will work.
- Experiences across different services and localities should be shared to develop a robust, supportive and ultimately successful practice.
- Opportunities for children and their families to input into practice improvement should be developed.

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Introduction

This research explores the experiences of foster carers and prospective adoptive parents during the **introductions process**. It has been undertaken to help improve the way practitioners work together in planning, supporting and facilitating the introductions process between adoptive parents and their children.

The introductions process is the short time in which the prospective adoptive parent(s) and their children meet for the first time and start to get to know each other. It is also when the parents get to find out about the child's routine before taking them to live in their new home. It is one of the most important parts of an adoption and one that needs careful planning and support to ensure its smooth running as well as positive outcomes for all involved

The process usually lasts from several days to a few weeks and allows the child and their new parent(s) to feel confident and comfortable about the move. It is when parents and children begin to form the crucial attachments that will make them a family.

The planning, supervision and support of this vitally important process involves a number of practitioners, the prospective adoptive parent(s) and, if appropriate, the child or children. It is a very intense and emotional time for foster carers, the prospective adoptive parent(s) and children. It is a time when a child will be unsettled by the change in their routine and care. However much each child is looking forward to meeting their forever family they will naturally have feelings of apprehension and loss.

During the process foster carers must share their home and lives with people who are initially strangers. They must begin to step back from taking care of a child they have fostered for months, often years. Prospective adoptive parents will be spending long days in someone else's home, often travelling substantial distances. They will be exhausted from the physical demands of the process but even more so from the emotion of meeting and getting to know a much wanted child or children.

As an adoptive parent I have been through this process myself and have worked with adoption services in information and training events for foster carers and prospective adopters. I experienced good and not so good things within the introductions process and heard from others about what caused problems or works well. I think there are lessons to be learned that could help professionals work together to improve the way that introductions are planned and carried out.

Aims of the project

This project looks at the experiences of foster carers and prospective adoptive parents during the introductions process. It focuses on introductions involving children under two years old, as at this age children will not be directly involved in the planning of the process, timetable or reviewing. This cut off was determined to make the research more manageable given the constraints of the project.

The project aims to

- investigate what helps to ensure the best experience and outcome of an introductions process
- investigate ways in which integrated planning has contributed to making this process as easy and rewarding as possible for the families and carers involved.
- make recommendations to support the spread of good practice in integrated working.

This project focuses on the experiences of foster carers and prospective adoptive parents who went on to adopt. The original plan had been to also look at the experiences of social workers who work with foster carers and looked after children and adoption social workers. This was discussed with the local Research Manager and Adoption Services Manager who felt it inappropriate for them to be involved with the research as it was being carried out by an adoptive parent. It was felt that this might lead to a conflict of interests if any support was sought from social services at a later time. It was suggested that I work with another area authority but this was impossible due to time constraints and practical considerations.

There were also concerns raised about confidentiality as I am already acquainted with some of the interviewees and their experiences through adoption networks. Measures were put in place to ensure that only information gathered during the project was used, confidentiality was ensured and that all those taking part in the project understood and were comfortable with this (see Appendix 1). The reworking of the project has proved to be a positive thing as the original remit would have been extremely difficult to achieve in the time-scale and the breadth of information gathered difficult to do justice to in the report structure.

Context

Many adoption agencies produce leaflets and information outlining what the process is for and some detail about what will happen. These tend to be fairly brief bullet points.

Prospective adoptive parents often receive information about introductions, suggestions about how to handle them and examples of introduction timetables as part of their preparation pack.

Most foster carers receive training in the introductions process within their general training programme. The length and in all likelihood the quality of this training varies from area to area, and there do not appear to be any national guidelines or standards around this.

There has been very little work done to look at what helps to make a good introduction, or proves unhelpful in the process. While in the main, guiding principles remain constant, practice appears to vary from area to area and seems to be based on what an individual feels is best for the child mixed with carrying on with how things have always been done.

There has been a piece of work carried out and funded by Cumbria Social Services to look at the experiences of those involved in introductions, their experiences and how these may have contributed to adoption disruptions. This research was carried out in early 2007 using similar methodology to this project (although on a larger scale) and looking at the experiences of those involved. Importantly this report also looks at the experiences of those involved with placements that have broken down.

There has been a delay in the production of the above-mentioned report, which it is hoped will be completed soon. It is hoped that the present investigative research into the role that introductions can play in the success of an adoptive placement will be complementary to the Cumbria piece of work looking at how effectively people worked together, or not, to make introductions a good experience. This would appear to be an important development towards recognizing how crucial a successful introduction is to the future of a placement, and that the factors for success or failure need to be investigated and influence practice.

There has also a British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering publication *Linking and Introductions* by Sheila Byrne (2000). This is a good practice guide for social workers within this area. While addressing the needs of the child and others involved in introductions and giving broad recommendations for policy and practice, it is a fairly brief piece of work and does not give case studies or specific examples of what has worked well and what has not.

Considering how crucial this process is agreed to be in contributing to successful placements, this lack of research, evaluation or guidance is surprising.

Methodology

The work was carried out through a series of qualitative interviews. Where possible these were carried out face to face, but several were carried out as telephone interviews where a meeting was impossible. I spoke with four foster carers and four adoptive parents. These included a single adopter, a lesbian couple and an adopter from a BME community. All the adopters I spoke with have successfully adopted the child that they speak about being introduced to. The scale of the project did not allow me to speak to prospective adopters who had not continued with the adoption of a child they went through the introductory process with.

A standard series of questions was asked that covered the

- planning
- information and preparation
- first meeting
- reviewing
- final day.

There was also space for people to speak about what was good or bad, and what could have been done differently. (See Appendix 2 for questionnaires)

Alongside this, a literature review was carried out to find out what information about the effectiveness of the introductions process was already in existence.

Findings

The introductions process is quite unlike anything that most people will ever experience. It is emotionally and physically draining and the adoptive parents I spoke with were in the main not prepared for the intensity of this, although they did accept that this was largely unavoidable.

The foster carers I spoke with all had several years' experience of the process of introductions and so were familiar with the process and understood the emotions that can be provoked within it. They also had support and information from other foster carers when they were less experienced, alongside training from their adoption agency.

Planning

Planning for the introduction of a child to their prospective adoptive family takes place at a meeting where prospective adopters, foster carers, their social workers and the child's social workers should all be present.

Planning meetings

All the foster carers and adopters that I spoke with were involved in the meetings to plan the introductions. Foster carers were obviously used to this kind of meeting and the professionals involved and in the main were happy with their involvement in the planning. One foster carer did speak about the fact that this can be a difficult time for foster carers as it makes their impending loss a reality and the planning meeting the start of the grieving process. This can be quite difficult to deal with as the meeting takes place against a background of adopters trying hard and often failing to contain their excitement and happiness.

'The planning meeting can be very difficult for carers as well as adopters – the planning is essentially about the day that child will leave, but of course it is very exciting for the adopters. Fosterers and adopters have very different feelings in the meeting.'

The feelings around the meetings for adopters were less clear. All were involved and invited to comment but the timing of the meetings seems to have an impact on how useful they were. By necessity, meetings are at a time when momentous things are happening for adopters. However, sometimes this did make it difficult for adopters to be fully involved.

'The panel meeting to approve the match took place in the morning, and about an hour later we all met for the planning meeting...I was in a bit of a daze really...I think I was in a bit of shock that the process was over and I was going to be a Mum.'

'The meeting with our daughter was arranged to take place directly after the planning meeting so we didn't really hear half of what was being said as we were just thinking about that.'

Knowing what to expect

Although people I spoke with had received some information about introductions, most did not feel they had been told about what would, or should, happen on a day-to-day basis. This lack of knowledge may have contributed to adopters accepting plans made that in retrospect they may have voiced concerns about if armed with greater knowledge. The length of the days, on top of at least an hour's drive each way was something that many people commented on as being almost unsustainable.

'I remember my social worker asking that a rest day be put in and how I felt, but I just wanted to get it done. In retrospect I should have asked for some shorter days as I had an hour's drive there and back every day through the rush hour and had no notion of how exhausted I'd be.'

Adopters often do very long days in order to see a child get up in the morning and go to bed at night, and this is obviously a necessary step. Some adopters were asked to do a series of 12 to 14 hour days, with travel on top, and so did talk of how tired they got. On realizing that their adoptive daughter didn't really have a bedtime routine at this point in her life, one parent agreed with the foster carers that they shouldn't stay until the little girl went to sleep at 11pm – often with the foster carers dozing alongside. In contrast, another adopter was persuaded by the foster mum that she should stay overnight with her child, alongside a 12 hour day either side, despite the fact that her child very rarely woke at night. This was something the adopter found very difficult as time away from a busy foster family was needed to recuperate from exhausting days.

The lack of knowledge in some cases also made it more difficult for adopters to question what was happening even if they thought it was probably not the right way to proceed. One initial meeting with a child lasted five or six hours, as the child went to sleep and the adults chatted and then waited for the child to wake up. Although the adopters would have chosen to have left earlier, they didn't want to seem disinterested in the child and so ended up staying far longer than they wanted or was appropriate for a first visit.

Experienced foster carers also commented on the need to explain to prospective adopters exactly what their role was and what would happen during the introductions period. Several adopters and fosterers said that they thought it would be very useful for prospective adopters to have much more information about what to expect during the introductions period on both a practical and an emotional level.

Process

Introductions are a time of mixed emotions, of excitement and stress for all involved. Some of the adopters and fosters that I spoke with had seen fairly informal handouts but no-one knew of any guidance or standards that provide either basic principles of how the process is run or what people can expect from it. As one foster carer put it:

'Introductions are a very false situation of bringing people together...You need to think about and understand the emotions of everyone involved in the process.'

Although the process of introductions was broadly similar and in the main based on shared principles, these seem to be something the professionals involved know

and understand, but they are not brought to the attention of adoptive parents, or presumably older children involved.

Information

There are many well documented examples of adopters not being provided with sufficient, or the right information, about the child they are considering adopting. The reasons for this are many and varied, and sometimes unavoidable. This happens at various stages of the adoption process and was something that was mentioned as making things difficult in the context of introductions.

Although, in the main, information about the current home environment of a child was made available to prospective adopters, one of the sets of adopters we spoke with had not been given enough information about their daughter's home circumstances. These adopters were adopting a child from another part of the country and the fact that two authorities had to liaise about the placement may offer insight into why this happened.

The adopters arrived to meet their child for the first time to find that as well as the toddler who was also being fostered there were a teenage foster child and a birth daughter living there. They found this difficult and that it added to their anxiety around what is already an extremely stressful time. This was exacerbated by their concerns that the fact that they were a lesbian couple might be an issue:

‘it was a difficult situation to deal with. How would these children react to what was happening, especially as we are a lesbian couple?...What made the difference was that we weren't informed properly, which just made us more anxious.’

There may be instances where information would be better to not be shared. One foster family I spoke with had been told they could not apply to adopt a young child they were fostering, but when they later found out they could have applied (and it was likely it would have been looked on favourably by the authorities) it was too late. The prospective adopters were told this before introductions took place. The foster carers found this very hard to accept and felt it would have been better for the adopters not to have known.

One set of adopters also spoke of a problem they had with obtaining the most basic of information.

‘At the planning meeting we had tried to get hold of information about what our son had had in terms of injections, no one seemed to know...there were also delays with the red book, I think maybe the health visitor brought it with her to the meeting.’

This did cause the adopters further anxiety in what had already been a somewhat chaotic process; it was redeemed, however, by the professionalism of the foster mum

‘She made sure we had all the information we needed. For us it was a relief to have a bit of faith in someone.’

The decision-making process

The decision process as to when a child is ready to move to his or her new home is one that was rather opaque to many adopters. From what people said there does seem to be a need to ensure that the decision-making process is transparent from the start so that false assumptions aren't made. One adopter told us that the foster mum was:

‘very clear that she knew better than social services how things should proceed. She was also very clear in how much her opinion counted...this was obviously very intimidating and made me want to ensure things were kept pleasant and friendly – it meant I didn't challenge things that maybe I should have done.’

In the main, things went smoothly, but two sets of adopters did say they felt this was largely down to the way they ensured relations with foster parents stayed positive, going along with things they didn't always feel comfortable with and deploying skills and sensitivities that not all adopters may have.

Support

Support during introductions is mainly provided to the foster carers and to the prospective adoptive parents involved through their social workers. There may be other professionals involved for some introductions but this report looks only at cases where social work adoption and fostering teams provided this support. Social workers tend to be present at the initial meeting and the goodbye meeting and through telephone contact for the rest of the process. As one foster carer put it:

‘When the child first meets its new family, the social worker comes along, stays for about fifteen minutes...and if they are good they just drift out the door and you hardly notice.’

This is not always easy to achieve, as one adoptive mum's experience illustrates.

‘As I met my son for the first time, both the social worker and foster mum were taking photos – with flashes. I am sure they were trying to catch a special moment but I did find it difficult to deal with. I was meeting my son for the first time, but ended up feeling rather self-conscious about having

an audience to a momentous meeting. It has rather put me off these photos as all I can remember is how I was feeling.'

Getting a balance is not easy to achieve and will be dependent on the individual case. Sometimes support is needed to make sure that things are progressing as they should be and that everyone is clear about what is expected.

'The first meeting should have been a short one, an hour or two...but I didn't want to appear keen to cut my first visit short. I don't think you can overestimate how strange the first meeting is and the pressure of knowing you are being observed and judged to see if you're bonding. I think there should have been some monitoring of the situation so the first meeting was a short one – a phone call from one of the social workers involved maybe.'

However, a very different experience was spoken of, when the social worker may have offered too much support:

'Our child's social worker was regularly around at the start and end of each day to monitor how things were going...it became artificial and didn't really work.'

The foster carers I interviewed were generally happy with the support they had received and with their role within the introductions process. Most felt they had received good support and had been involved in all the aspects about which they should have been. However, there were concerns voiced that foster carers weren't always seen as professionals working alongside social workers and families in this sensitive and complex process.

All the adopters spoken to acknowledge that it is the foster carer who makes the introductions process a good one or not, and some foster carers felt that this wasn't really acknowledged:

'The introductions were the best part of the process for us, I can't fault it, but that was dependent on the foster parents – it all depends on getting the right foster parents.'

One foster carer spoke at how much her role had diminished over the years and the potential loss for the child involved in the process through this.

'I no longer have any involvement in choosing who the adoptive parents are to be...Foster parents felt valued and part and parcel of the process, although we didn't have the overall decision...The child's point of view and the gut feeling of the foster carer's has gone.'

Ensuring equality

The adopters I spoke with consisted of a single adopter and a lesbian couple. Although these adopters had obviously thought through various issues around adoption and were very confident they would make good adoptive parents, in both instances they spoke about their concern that foster carers or their children may question them as adopters because of their status. There is a pressure that all adopters naturally feel (and that foster carers acknowledge is inevitably there), which is that they are being judged as to whether they are good enough for this child. This is inevitable as foster carers will have developed a strong bond to a child and will want the best for him or her. Adopters who are gay, single, disabled or from other groups are likely to be more sensitive to this process and this needs to be considered when ensuring they have the right support.

[ocial work perspective

During the literature review for this work I found one publication that included the introductions process. *Linking and Introductions* by Sheila Byrne was published by the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering in 2000 and is a good practice guide for social workers. It starts from the standpoint that introductions are a way of testing the viability of a proposed adoptive placement and, once agreed, provide the basis for a smooth transition. Although I did not discuss this directly within the interviews, I believe that this is not a description that any of the adopters, or I believe foster carers, would recognize from the process. This indicates that there needs to be a clearer and agreed purpose to the introductions process so that everyone knows what to expect and what is expected of them.

Implications for practice

Integrated working

- From the outset, adoption and fostering teams should ensure that the management of the introduction process is as open and transparent as possible.
- Within the context of an evolving and flexible introductions process practitioners should collectively acknowledge and take account of the pressures on the prospective adoptive parents and foster parents during the process.

- Planning meetings need to be organized to consider the needs of the prospective adoptive parents and foster carers in their timing and content.
- Practitioners should work together to provide user-friendly information for prospective adoptive parents and foster parents about the introductions process. This must cover both the practical arrangements and the emotions that may be experienced by all parties involved.
- Information and approaches should be consistent across all professions and agreed in advance of the introductions process. Information needs to be provided during the time of introductions as well as during preparation training.
- Practitioners should include a clear route map of what will happen both practically and emotionally.
- Adoption and fostering teams should look at how they can better prepare prospective adoptive parents for the introductions process. This may be through specific information or training evenings.
- Facilitated contact between foster carers and prospective adopters should be developed where possible, as soon as a match is agreed.
- Foster carers are a key factor to a successful introduction. Adoption and fostering teams need to ensure that they are central to the planning processes and that they receive all necessary training and support.

Other

- The review and decision-making processes relating to an introduction and to questions of when a child is ready to move need to be transparent.
- Research should be carried out into the role of introductions in creating a successful placement and these findings used to improve practice and outcomes.
- National good practice guidance around the introductions process needs to be produced by government.

Conclusion

The experiences of both prospective adopters and foster carers of the introductions process have clear messages for those working in adoption and fostering services. There is a need for a much more integrated approach to ensure that everyone involved knows what to expect during the process and how it will work. There needs to be a greater awareness of the stressful nature of the process and the need for information to be provided at the right time and in the right way.

However, one of the most striking findings was the lack of literature around the adoption introductions process. There does not appear to have been any evaluation of the effects of practices or circumstances occurring during the process. The work being carried out by Cumbria Social Services may go some way to address this, but there is clearly a need for a process that has such a potential impact on the success of an adoptive placement to be researched properly.

The practices around introductions seem to have evolved from the experience, skills and knowledge of those overseeing and supporting them. Although there may have been opportunities for children and their families to have some input into the development of practice, there is no evidence of this having happened.

The shared experiences of many of the foster carers and adopters who I spoke with indicate there may well be valuable lessons to be learned from much stronger joint working, not only between the various practitioners involved but also those whose lives are shaped by fostering and adoptions services. By drawing on experiences across different services and localities, a more robust, supportive and ultimately successful practice could be developed.

References

Sheila Byrne (2000) *Linking and Introductions: Helping children join adoptive families*. [run on] British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.

Adoption Introductions. A Project funded by Cumbria County Council, currently being completed.

Appendix 1

Information for project participants

Project about introductions between a child and their new parents during adoption

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Background

The 'introductions process' happens when a child and their adoptive parent(s) meet each other for the first time through to when the child finally goes home to their new family. During this week or so the child and their parents get to know each other. It is vital for the new family that this process is made as rewarding and relaxed as possible to ensure everyone can feel happy and confident about the move. This is obviously a very important time in the lives of parents and their children and it can be emotional for everyone.

As well the foster carers, adoptive parents and the child, several social workers and possibly other professionals can be involved in the planning, support and monitoring of the process.

Why am I carrying out this research?

As an adoptive parent I have been through the process myself and experienced good and not so good things within it. I think there are lessons that could be learned that could help professionals improve the way introductions are planned and carried out.

Who is funding the work?

The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). This is a government-funded organization which exists to improve the lives of children, young people, their families and carers by ensuring that all people working with them have the best possible training, qualifications, support and advice. It also helps children and young people's organizations and services to work together so that the child is at the centre of all services.

How will I gather information?

I am talking to four foster parents and four adoptive parents about what the introductions process was like for them, and what they thought it was like for their

children. I want to find out who was involved in the planning as well as the actual introductions. I want to know what worked well, what didn't work or was difficult, and what could be done to improve things in the future

What am I asking parents and carers to do?

I would like to talk to you for about an hour about what it was like for you. I can come to your home (or speak over the telephone if more practical). I will be taking notes of what you say, and if you agree, I might also record the interview so that I can get as much information as possible from our conversation. I would like to be able to speak with you sometime before the middle of January. I will pay each person I interview a fee of £30 to cover any expenses that may be incurred.

Is what you say anonymous?

Absolutely. I won't be using any names of parents, carers or children, or locations in the report. I will treat all information confidentially and ensure information is stored securely. I will also send you over short notes of things that you spoke about to ensure that I have understood what you have told me and you are happy for those experiences to be used.

What will happen to what you say?

I will look at everything that people have told me and pull the information together into similar areas or themes that will become sections of the report. At the end of the report will be some messages or recommendations for practitioners (or professionals) that you have told me might improve things. I won't be able to include everything here, but will try to ensure that all the really important things people have told me are reported.

Am I getting information from anywhere else?

I will be gathering any recent information or advice that has been produced about the introductions process from organizations such as the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), the Fostering Network, Adoption UK and social services. This will provide background to the project but it is what you say that is really important.

When will the report be produced?

The report has to be finished by the end of February 2009. An event will be held in April 2009 where all the projects or reports will be published and publicized. You will be sent a copy of the finished report.

Appendix 2

Adopters interview

How were the introductions planned? Which professionals were involved?

Were you involved in the planning? How did this go/you feel about the planning?

Were you/everyone clear about what was going to happen? Did you have enough practical information/guidance? What/who was most helpful? Were there things it would have been useful to know before the process started?

What was it like when you first met your child? Were there professionals (other than the foster carers) there/involved? Was this a good/bad thing? Could they have done more?

Were you involved in reviewing how things were going? Did you feel you could have an input?

How was the final day handled? Who was involved?

Do you think there is anything that could have made the introductions easier/better for your child/for you/for the foster family?

Did you feel you had enough information before and during the process?

Was there anything that you thought you should have been involved in and weren't?

What was good about your experience?

What was bad about your experience?

Is there anything that you think should have been done differently?

Appendix 3

Fosterers interview

How were the introductions planned? Who was involved?

Were you involved in the planning as much as you wanted to be? How did this go/you feel about the planning?

Were you/everyone clear about what was going to happen? Did you have enough practical information/guidance? Did you have enough information about the adopter's? Were there things it would have been useful to know before the process started? What/who was most helpful?

What was it like when the adopters first met the child? Were there other professionals there/involved? Was this a good/bad thing? Could they have done more to support you or the child?

Were you involved in reviewing how things were going? Did you feel you could have enough of an input? How were decisions reached and communicated to the adopters?

How was the final day handled? Who was involved?

Do you think there is anything that could have made the introductions easier/better for the child/for you/for the adoptive family?

Did you feel you had enough information before and during the process?

Was there anything that you thought you should have been involved in and weren't?

What was good about your experience?

What was bad about your experience?

Is there anything that you think should have been done differently?

The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

We want England's children and young people's workforce to be respected by peers and valued for the positive difference it makes to children, young people and their families.

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