



# **‘Black’ families for ‘black’ children?: An Evaluation of Action for Children’s Practice in Ethnically Matching Black, Asian and Dual Heritage Children for Adoption**

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Action for Children commissioned the University of Central Lancashire to conduct an evaluation of Action for Children’s practice in ethnically matching Black, Asian and dual heritage children for adoption. The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of Action for Children’s Adoption Black Families in developing, supporting and encouraging adoptive parents (and families) from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds to provide permanent homes for children and young people waiting for adoption. The study was commissioned by Action for Children, and took 10 months from September 2009 to June 2010.

Research methods included a literature review; site visits and interviews with Action for Children staff; interviews and focus groups with adopters; an internet survey of referring social workers and managers in local authorities; and analysis of statistical information and published reports. Comparison was made with Action for Children’s Adoption Midlands.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

- The rationale and ethos that black, Asian dual heritage and minority ethnic children thrive best when placed with adoptive parents of a similar ethnic origin was shared by both Adoption Black Families and Adoption Midlands.
- Both adoption services similarly aimed to put children at the centre of their work, and to ensure that children of BME and dual heritage were matched with adoptive parents of a similar ethnicity, religion and culture.
- The key difference between the two services was that the recruitment of BME and dual heritage adopters and ethnic matching was the sole focus of Adoption Black Families whereas Adoption Midlands had a wider remit and also placed white children with white adopters.

- With an all BME staff group and central focus on ethnically matched placements, Adoption Black Families had developed specialist expertise and insight into the myriad of ethnicities, cultures and religions of both adoptive parents and children.

### **Detail of Adopters and Children Placed**

- Adoption Black Families had recruited more than four times the number of BME adopters than Adoption Midlands over the same timeframe. Adoption Midlands also recruited white adopters during this time.
- The largest proportion of BME adopters from both Adoption Black Families and Adoption Midlands were of dual heritage (50% and 65% of adopters respectively).
- The majority of adoptive parents were from black and/or black dual heritage ethnicities (63% of Adoption Black Families adopters, 71% of Adoption Midlands adopters). Those from Asian and/or Asian dual heritage background were the second largest group (31% of Adoption Black Families adopters, 29% of Adoption Midlands adopters). Others were couples representing both Asian and black minority ethnicities or 'other' minority ethnicities.
- Both Adoption Black Families and Adoption Midlands recorded comparable numbers of single parents adopters (21% and 18% respectively), with the majority comprising women of African or African/Caribbean heritage.
- The average time for Adoption Black Families to complete the process of enquiry from prospective adopters to approval as adoptive parents, placement and legal adoption of BME children were two, three and five months quicker respectively than the same processes for Adoption Midlands.
- From approval as adopters to placement of a child(ren), Adoption Midlands took one month longer (on average) than Adoption Black Families. This indicates that the throughput of adoptions can be improved when a service has a primary focus of placing BME children with BME adopters.
- Over the past five years (2004-2009) Adoption Black Families had placed 98 BME children with 78 BME adopters in comparison to 26 BME children placed with 17 BME adopters by Adoption Midlands. Over the same time period, Adoption Midlands had placed 95 children in total with 52 families.
- The largest percentage of children placed by Adoption Black Families and Adoption Midlands were black and/or black dual heritage (65% and 58% respectively). Just over a quarter of children placed by Adoption Black Families, and just over a third placed by Adoption Midlands were from Asian

and/or Asian dual heritage ethnicities. The remainder were from 'other' minority ethnic backgrounds.

- The largest proportions of children placed by both Adoption Black Families and Adoption Midlands were from dual heritage backgrounds (41% and 50% respectively).
- Of the children placed for adoption with Adoption Black Families, 45% were recorded as having no religion, 30% as Christian and 13% as Muslim. Adoption Midlands did not make information about the religion of the child placed for adoption available to the Evaluation Team.
- Over half the children placed by Adoption Black Families were under two years of age as were under a third of Adoption Midlands BME children. The largest numbers of BME children placed by Adoption Midlands were between two and three years old.
- Slightly more boys than girls from BME backgrounds were placed by both Adoption Black Families and Adoption Midlands (54% and 58% respectively).

## **Recruitment**

- Adoption Black Families dealt with a large volume of enquiries from people interested in adopting (342 between October 2008 to October 2009), many of which did not proceed to full application. This is evidence of a significant level of interest in adopting within BME communities, and of the demand for the service Adoption Black Families provides.
- The evaluation findings dispel the common assumption that BME communities are not interested in coming forward to adopt, and show that recruitment practices and processes that are ethnically and culturally sensitive can make a significant difference in stimulating this interest.
- Adopters identified a variety of reasons for choosing Adoption Black Families. The main reason was that the project specialised in finding families for BME children, and that they knew it would offer ethnically sensitive support to prospective adopters.
- An all BME staff group was perceived by both staff and existing adopters to be a critical aspect of what Adoption Black Families provided. However, adopters from Asian heritage expressed the need for a wider understanding of Asian cultures.
- Adoption Black Families had engaged in a variety of generic recruitment activities in approaching BME communities, such as through the black press and other media as well as community events.

- Having a specialist recruitment and marketing worker ensured Adoption Black Families developed extensive networks from which to target its' recruitment campaigns for prospective BME adopters.
- Neither Adoption Black Families or Adoption Midlands had engaged in finely targeted recruitment campaigns based on systematic analysis of information about children in the in care system or geographic populations.
- Almost universally, Adoption Black Families' adopters participating in the Evaluation referred to having had negative experiences of local authority adoption services. Some had contacted several local authorities and received no response, or local authorities had taken an unacceptable length of time to respond. Others felt that local authorities had not shown interest in them as prospective adopters, or had stated they were unable to support them to find a suitable ethnic match.
- Local authority social workers stated they referred children to Adoption Black Families primarily because of its' reputation for working exclusively with BME families, and perceived it as being successful in matching BME children with BME adopters.

## **Matching**

- From analysis of records, the main elements of a 'good match' were found to be the same as for all children that are 'looked after' and placed for adoption, regardless of ethnicity. This included an appreciation that adoption is about meeting the child's needs, as well as an appreciation of the parenting capacity and characteristics of the adopters.
- The ethnicity and age of the children awaiting adoption were at the centre of matching decisions. Where adopters had expressed a preference for a young child of a specific ethnicity and there were no young children from these backgrounds awaiting adoption, adopters had usually agreed to the placement of an older child of the requisite ethnicity.
- Almost all the prospective adopters in the reports examined and several adopters who were interviewed expressed the view that it was central to their connectedness and matching with a child to have a physical resemblance between themselves and the child(ren). Both staff and adopters identified this as a key element in a successful match taking place.
- Adoption Black Families was able to offer a broad range of adoptive families for BME children awaiting placement because it had a network of resources (including local authorities, adoption consortia, adoption register, adoption publication) nationwide, as well as active local connections with London-based BME community organisations.

- Just over half (51%) of ethnic matches that Adoption Black Families made between BME prospective adopters and BME children were a close or perfect 'fit'. In other words, the ethnicity, culture and religion of these adopters and child were the same.
- However, there were several matches where the ethnicity, culture and/or religion of the adopters and the child were very different. This was understood and rationalised by staff as making the 'best fit' when faced with complex ethnic heritages, particularly with regards to children and/or adopters of dual heritage.
- Of key concern in these complex cases, was that a child would be brought up by their adopters with clear sense of *identity*, who they are, what their ethnic and cultural background is, and an understanding and appreciation of their birth parents religion(s).
- Two kinds of ethnic matches were being made by Adoption Black Families. Firstly, *General* ethnic matches based on physical resemblance, black and/or dual heritage, Asian and/or dual heritage. Secondly, *Specific* ethnic matches based on exact region, culture and religion, for instance, a Pakistani Muslim child with Pakistani Muslim adoptive parents.
- The findings suggest that the increasing diversity of dual heritage can present conceptual and practical challenges to achieving an ethnic match between children and adoptive parents.
- Although for many of the children placed through Adoption Black Families religion was not specified and could therefore not be considered in the match, some matches appeared to overlook birth parents' stated preference for their child to be brought up within a particular religion.
- Both projects stated an inclusive approach to the placement of BME and dual heritage children with gay and/or single adopters from BME and dual heritage backgrounds.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evaluation of Adoption Black Families provides evidence of its effectiveness in the recruitment of adopters from a range of BME communities, and of successful matching of BME and dual heritage children with adopters of similar ethnic, cultural and religious heritage. In comparison to the mainstream adoption project, Adoption Black Families recruited more BME adopters and subsequently matched more BME and dual heritage children with these adopters. Over the five year period for which statistics were examined, there appeared to be almost no breakdown in adoptive placements made by Adoption Black Families. Furthermore, the timescales achieved by Adoption Black Families from initial inquiry to granting adoption orders was well within national quality standards.

Recent studies suggest that the challenge of matching BME and dual heritage children with suitable adopters is becoming ever more complex with the ever changing composition of ethnicities in the UK. Adoption Black Families as a specialist service focusing on ethnically matched adoption placements was making adoption placement decisions within this challenging arena.

In contrast with their experience of other adoption agencies, adopters with Adoption Black Families stated that the service was culturally and ethnically sensitive to their needs. Furthermore, they felt that the service promoted good outcomes for BME and dual heritage children. Similarly, referring social workers contacted Adoption Black Families because of its specialist focus and past satisfaction with its' matching and placement outcomes for BME and dual heritage children. Adoption Black Families specialist provision for BME adopters and children was closely associated by evaluation participants with its effectiveness.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of the Evaluation support the following recommendations for future service development:

1. The adoption workforce should be diverse and reflect the ethnicities of adopters and children waiting for adoption.
2. The recruitment of adopters should be based on systematic analysis of the 'market need' (i.e. adopters needed from specific communities to meet the needs of children requiring adoption placement).
3. Consistent ongoing monitoring and information systems are important to effective development and marketing of BME adoption services.
4. The good practice that is evident from this Evaluation needs to be shared more widely across organisations and sectors.
5. The adoption process needs to incorporate trigger points for communication with prospective adopters and this should be made explicit at the outset. A flowchart of processes might be helpful.
6. Theoretical, policy and practice focused discussion regarding the changing nature of BME and dual heritage identities should take place to ensure that the needs of BME and dual heritage children are recognised and met.
7. Future research should be considered into medium and long term outcomes for BME and dual heritage children in ethnically matched adoption placements regarding their identity, self esteem, how they have engaged with society, school and employment, and the durability of the placement with their adoptive parents.