



# Factors affecting adoption in Wales: Predictors of variation in time between entry to care and adoptive placement



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## ABSTRACT

In the UK, there has been an increasing emphasis in recent years on reducing the delay in making permanent placements for children who cannot remain living with their birth parents. Adoption is one such plan for permanence. This study examined those factors that predicted a lengthier care episode for a national sample of children recently placed for adoption. The data was drawn from the Wales Adoption Study. This is a mixed methods study that analysed information from the adoption reports of all children placed for adoption over a 13 month period during 2014 and 2015 ( $n = 374$ ). Children were aged between 0 months and 6 1/2 years on entry into care. On average, the time between entering care and moving into an adoptive placement was 528 days. The results of the regression analysis showed that four child-related factors were associated with a longer wait in care before being placed for adoption. These were developmental delay, externalizing behaviour, serious and enduring health problems/disability and exposure to domestic violence. The procedural factors examined showed no association with length of time to placement. The findings from this study make a substantial contribution to further developing what is known about the timeliness of adoption within the current UK context. The implications for policy and practice are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Adoption and permanence

Within the context of legislation, policy and practice in both England and Wales, there has been an increasing emphasis in recent years on reducing the delay in making permanent placements for children who cannot remain living with their birth parents (Department for Education, 2012, National Adoption Service, 2015). All children in local authority care for more than four months should have a plan for permanence. The framework for permanence centres on the maintenance of quality relationships between children and their carers (Boddy, 2013), to help provide children with 'a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity' (Department for Education, 2015: 22). In practical terms, this means ensuring that children 'have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond' (Department for Education, 2015: 22). Adoption is one of a range of

permanence options for children unable to live safely with birth parents. Others include family and friends care and long-term fostering.

### 1.2. Adoption and developmental outcomes

Most children adopted from the UK care system will have experienced abuse and/or neglect within their birth family (Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015). As a result of their early adverse life experiences (including for some, harm suffered in utero) and the potential for trauma, grief and loss through being removed from birth family and/or other primary carers, many children adopted today have a range of physical, emotional and social needs. Timely permanent placements are therefore emphasised in order to provide a stable and secure base through which children can recover developmentally (van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009) and thrive in the long-term (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Adopted children fare better than their peers who remain in care, with marked improvements in a range of developmental domains, including growth, security, attachment, behaviour and cognitive capabilities (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006; Lloyd & Barth, 2011).

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### 1.3. Stability and disruption

Placement stability is a component of permanence. It is an important measure to consider because stability and, in particular, early stability, has been linked to more positive developmental outcomes (Biehal, Ellison, Baker & Sinclair, 2010; Harden, 2004; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan & Localio, 2007; Zima, Bussing, Freeman, Yang, Belin & Forness, 2000). Inevitably, some arrangements, intended as permanent, disrupt. The adoption disruption rates post-order in England and Wales have been calculated as being very low; 3.2% in England over a 12 year period and 2.6% over an 11 year period in Wales. They compare favourably with the disruption rates of special guardianship orders and residence orders (now called child arrangements orders), which over a five year period in England have disruption rates of 5.7% and 14.7% respectively (Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015).

Previous research has indicated that a child's age at the time of their adoptive placement has a strong association with outcomes, insofar as the older the child when placed, the greater the likelihood of the adoption disrupting (Barth & Berry, 1988; Dance & Rushton, 2005; Ivaldi, 2000; Wijedasa & Selwyn, 2014). Moreover, an association has been found between children who wait in care longer to be placed with their adoptive families and later placement disruption (Selwyn et al., 2006; Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015). These factors, all linked to timeliness, demonstrate the importance of understanding those factors that predict delay.

### 1.4. Reasons for delay

Adoption is arguably the most drastic of all family interventions, as it severs a child's legal ties to their birth family permanently. The decision to pursue adoption therefore has to be considered very carefully, and is one of the most complex and difficult aspects of a social worker's role. On the one hand, there is clear evidence about the consequences of delay for children. On the other hand, it has been argued that new legal timescales introduced in England and Wales do not allow enough time for birth families to evidence sustained change in their parenting in order to resume the care of their children (Gupta & Lloyd-Jones, 2014).

A comprehensive review of the family justice system in England and Wales (Family Justice Review, 2011) highlighted delays in public law children's cases and made a series of recommendations, which included a statutory time limit of 26 weeks on court proceedings for care cases. This was introduced with effect from April 2014 and was intended to reduce the length of time taken by courts to reach decisions about placement plans. An overview of research evidence on child development and the impact of maltreatment were commissioned in response to the Family Justice Review, to assist decision-making by family justice professionals and facilitate a greater understanding of individual children's needs and appropriate timeframes (Brown & Ward, 2013). The English Government published an 'Action Plan on Adoption: tackling delay' (Department for Education, 2012), with a focus on tackling the causes and consequences of delay in relation to children being adopted. In Wales, the National Adoption Service (NAS) was established in 2014, following a National Assembly for Wales' Inquiry into Adoption that raised concerns about a number of issues, including delay (National Assembly for Wales, 2012). The National Adoption Service has set out, as a priority, their intention to place more children without delay (National Adoption Service, 2015). In England, in the year ending March 2015, the average time between a child entering care and moving in with their adoptive family was 18 months (Adoption Leadership Board, 2015). In Wales, the average time was 16.5 months (National Adoption Service, 2015). These time frames represent a large part of a (usually) young child's life.

### 1.5. Child characteristics and the timeliness of adoption

A range of child characteristics have been identified as affecting the timeliness of adoption. Age has been established as a strong predictor of

adoption; the older the child, the less likely their plan for adoption will be realised (Connell, Katz, Saunders & Tebes, 2006; Selwyn, Sturgess, Quinton & Baxter, 2006). Most prospective adopters express a clear preference for parenting younger children (Burge, Burke, Melklejohn & Groll, 2015; Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015).

Ethnicity also impacts on the timeliness of adoption, with Black and Asian children spending more time in care before adoption recommendations are made (Selwyn, Quinton, Harris, Wijedasa, Nawaz & Wood, 2010). It has been argued that an over-emphasis on ethnicity or cultural matching continues to cause delay in placing children with their adoptive families (Farmer & Dance, 2015).

Children with disabilities are also more like to face delay in placement (Avery, 2000; Baker, 2007; Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007). Often, adoptive placements for disabled children are not found at all (Selwyn, Sturgess, Quinton & Baxter, 2006). Whilst there seems to be a willingness by many prospective adopters to consider parenting a child with a 'mild' disability, those with moderate or severe difficulties tend to be discounted (Burge, Burke, Meiklejohn & Groll, 2015).

Children's behaviour at the time of entry into care has been shown to be influential in determining whether or not adoptive placements are made. Connell, Katz, Saunders and Tebes (2006) found that children with a diagnosed emotional or behavioural disorder were significantly less likely to be adopted. Leathers, Spielfogel, Gleeson and Rolock, (2012) found that whilst externalizing behaviour problems were negatively associated with the likelihood of adoption, internalizing behaviours, such as depression and anxiety, were not. The harmful effects of exposure to domestic violence (or intimate partner violence) on children is well established (Carpenter & Stacks, 2009). We wondered whether the timeliness of an adoptive placement was influenced by children's known exposure to domestic violence. To our knowledge, no systematic research has been conducted in this area.

### 1.6. Procedural factors influencing the timeliness of adoption

The process of matching children to their adoptive parents has been highlighted as a factor affecting the timeliness of placements. Particular issues include a reluctance from agencies to widen their search for adopters at an early stage; the provision of incomplete information about children and/or adopters; downplaying the complex needs of some children; and drift in the matching process (Farmer & Dance, 2015; Dance, 2015). A range of behavioural and attitudinal biases from social workers has also been identified as contributing to delay (Behavioural Insights Team, 2015; Farmer & Dance, 2015; Selwyn, Sempik, Thurston & Wijedasa, 2009). The decision to place children together for adoption as part of a sibling group can affect the timeliness of placements (Sinclair, 2007; Saunders & Selwyn, 2011).

Within the legal arena, the use of voluntary accommodation (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), as a route into care, has been criticised as contributing to placement delay (Doughty, 2016; Ofsted, 2012). Children under the age of 16 can only be accommodated under section 20 when those with parental responsibility give consent. Lengthy care proceedings caused by repeat or late assessments on birth parents or kin have also been identified as a contributory factor in placement delay (Ofsted, 2012; Selwyn et al., 2010). The 26-week time limit on proceedings is premised on an expectation that these assessments will be completed prior to the court application being issued.

Collectively, this brief overview of the literature highlights a range of factors that can impact on the length of time taken for a child to be placed for adoption. However, the relative importance of these different factors in determining the time to adoption has, to date, received little attention. This article compares the magnitude of various factors associated with the length of time children spend in care before moving to an adoptive placement. The evidence derives from data collected as part of the Wales Adoption Study. As of 31st March 2015, 5617 children were in local authority care in Wales. Five percent ( $n = 274$ ) of these children

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