

Robust matching for

MATCH NOT DISPATCH

There are roughly 4,000 adoptions in the UK each year.

20-33 per cent (800-1,333) breakdown before getting to court.

Why not reduce that number with robust and thoughtful matching?

**“All learning
is an experience,
the rest is just
information”
Albert Einstein**

HOW many children did you consider before actually adopting yours?

How many Form Fs (now CPR - Child Permanence Reports) did you study?

What criteria did you use for buying your last sofa?

And yes – these questions are connected.

For the latter, I reckon you decided its location, measured the maximum length, roughly determined the material, colour, and style. Then after looking at options you decided on preferred suppliers and visited the show rooms, (virtual or actual) talking to salesmen and listening to advice from friends. You probably visited a shop, sat or lounged in various settees and generally tried it on for size. You laughed at some couches, sneered at others, lusted after a few and eventually picked the sofa which suited your needs best. Then, and only then, did you buy.

Bet you weren't so logical when you selected your child. How many CPR (old F) forms did you see?

The first set I read were for the children I then adopted. The second set, seven years later was when I joined an Adoption Panel.

The CPR is the report compiled by a social worker, using a standard BAAF proforma which documents a child's

history and reasons for recommending adoption. It's a chunky piece of paperwork presented to a local authority adoption panel and subsequently to potential adopters.

Establish a benchmark

My preparation in the early 90s was, for its time, excellent. My reaction to the Form F was emotional – I couldn't see the wood for the tears. I had no benchmark, or anything with which to compare and contrast the information, gaps, style and impact. I immediately felt a sense of connection, compassion and responsibility for these poor kids and their parents who'd had such a tough time. I've heard many other adopters say the same.

Fast forward seven years to my first adoption panel as an independent member. Again a sense of connection, compassion and responsibility, however now my emotional response was markedly different. I was outraged, furious, saddened and often overwhelmed by a case. I would read an individual set of papers then escape to the pool to physically pound the emotion out of my system. I wondered if I was up to the task.

Now, eight years later, I respond differently: generally measured, with much less emotion (though occasionally I spit feathers). Why? Because I've seen these forms before and have a benchmark. I know what to look for; I'm not so caught up in the emotion. I can see the facts, the voids and their implication, read between the lines and dispassionately imagine how the child will probably develop and what issues are likely to arise.

At a matching panel adopters are generally asked; "What attracted you to child xy?" I'd prefer the presupposing question; "How does xy compare to other children you looked at?" Often adopters haven't seriously looked at any other children. Maybe social workers have a specific, available child

in mind for them. This may be a perfectly good match, however the adopters don't have the experience to ask pertinent questions, be impassive or the confidence to trust their gut instinct.

They will be overwhelmed that at last they might truly become parents. Hence reading their first CPR is yet another emotional rollercoaster. The fear that saying 'not sure' or 'no' would be interpreted as a lack of commitment.

We need to empower adopters to understand CPRs at a much deeper level, so they can rise above their understandable heart yearning, gut churning initial response to a calmer more measured place.

Matching – internet dating

What if we view the matching process like internet dating? Sharp intake of breath from some readers . . . so just to clarify, I'm suggesting we consider the underlying principles and processes, not the cattle market element.

The parallels between internet dating and the adoption process are remarkable. Both takes guts and previous heart ache to start the process. The first tentative explorations are fraught with challenges and the other party's criteria being different to yours. (She wants a fling – he wants marriage. Adoption agencies are there for children – not to satisfy your longing to be a parent).

The first virtual or actual encounter can put people off internet dating for some considerable time. After half an hour of email exchanges a friend was offered dinner and extras by an air steward. She was shocked; she'd never met a straight air steward before.

Eventually personal recommendations directed her to a suitable agency, she then began flicking through profiles with a more knowing eye. (Hope you can now start to see the parallels).

permanence

The next stage is phone calls and brief meetings, during which values become visible, mismatches noticeable. Anomalies jump out. One chap withdrew from a meeting, because my mate is not a habitual drinker. Hoots of laughter when this gem was shared on a girly night out, leading to the comment; “a lucky escape. Do you really want to be involved with a man whose primary attachment figure is a bottle?”

So the process is equivalent to leafing through *Children Who Wait*, talking to some social workers, looking at a variety of CPR forms and sharing feelings with others (Adoption UK/girly night out). Each and every step gives more learning and criteria for decision making.

Is the dating process sometimes dispiriting and hopeless? Yes. Do people expect to find their ideal partner at the first attempt? No. So why do we expect approved adopters to view so few children (often just one) before making an even greater decision?

In-between opportunities

The time in-between completing the CPR, approval at panel and placement is often a twilight zone. (I'm calling people in this position 'inbetweens' i.e. late stage prospectives, waiting for panel approval, and approved adopters waiting for placements). It's actually a perfect time to really examine the sort of child who will enter your home, the family they came from and possible impact on you. There are countless methods.

Some pioneering authorities have recognised the potential for growth in this twilight zone and are exploring new ways 'inbetweens' can be educated. Bravely they are thinking outside the box – so here are a few of my ideas (some for social services, others for individuals) aimed at educating rather than teaching 'inbetweens'.

Social services departments could easily anonymize Child Permanence Reports for children already placed. These can be shared with inbetweens.

Anonymity and confidentiality can be ensured by changing DOB, names, add/delete siblings, etc. using simple word processing techniques) yet keeping the essence, detail and sheer volume. The content and consequent

emotional response is vital. No dumbing down or cutting out the painful bits – that's where the greatest learning exists.

In a consortium, each authority could produce several forms. Hence 'inbetweens' could review a dozen, compare and contrast them and ask 'what if', 'how come' and 'why' questions about realistic situations. Every adopter could establish their own benchmark.

Thus when it came to considering a real child for placement, the adopters know the CPR framework, have experienced the thinking process and are better placed to make an informed decision. The emotional element will be easier to manage and less overwhelming – though still tough.



Educate yourself about the sort of family your child is likely to have come from and the possible emotions stirred in you. Remove the rose coloured glasses. Often birth parents are people you'd cross the road to avoid. Seriously - drugs, alcohol, antisocial offences are common components – their observable behaviour sad and ugly. Some of these elements will be brought into your home by the child placed with you; imprinted before and post birth.

Step outside your comfort zone and into the traumatised child's world. Watch the award winning TV drama *Shameless* – I'm serious. Watch old episodes and then add some more violence, child humiliation or abuse. Imagine one of the Gallagher children is repeatedly told 'you're ugly, stupid and stink'.

Consider the impact on the brain formation of a foetus whose birth mother fails to eat, has regular panic attacks, is hospitalised for dehydration, smokes skunk most days, gets the

occasional battering and has binge drinking episodes.

Read *We need to talk about Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, the highly acclaimed 2005 Orange Fiction prize winner, recently serialised by Woman's Hour. Not because our children will become serial killers, but because the author's acute observation of the mother's feelings and the marital tensions raised by parenting their staggeringly disturbed birth child are profound.

This delightful story beautifully illustrates out of the box thinking.

Out of the box thinking

According to a news report, a certain private school in Washington DC was recently faced with a unique problem. A number of 12-year-old girls were beginning to use lipstick and would put it on in the bathroom.

That was fine, but after they put on their lipstick they would press their lips to the mirror leaving dozens of little lip prints.

Every night the maintenance man would remove them and the next day the girls would put them back. Several memos were posted about this, without effect. Finally the principal decided that something had to be done. She called all the girls to the bathroom and met them there with the maintenance man. She explained that all these lip prints were causing major problem for the custodian who had to clean the mirrors every night. To demonstrate how difficult it was to clean the mirrors, she asked the maintenance man to show the girls just how hard it was.

Under careful instructions, the man took out a long-handled squeegee,

Solemnly dipped it in the nearest toilet bowl, and scrubbed at the mirror. There was complete silence in the room. Since then, there have been no lip prints on the mirror. There are teachers . . . and then . . . there are educators.

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