

Family Time in Early
Permanence placements:
messages from research

RUTH COPSON

Existing research

EP practice varies widely between agencies across England (Brown and Mason, 2021).

Tensions in EP are stressful due to lack of 'entitlement' to the child on either side. (Monck et. al. (2003/2005)

EP carers' experience of uncertainty is linked to the presence of birth parents during family time (Pagé et. al., 2019)

Relationships with birth parents were valued most where the level of contact was high. (Kenrick, 2010)

High levels of contact can cause distress to infants but this can be mitigated by the ability to form strong attachments to primary carers at an early age (Kenrick, 2009).

Contact is about quality not quantity for infants (Humphreys and Kiraly, 2011)

PhD Research Questions

How is family time experienced and understood by parents, EP carers and infants?

How do practitioners plan, manage and experience family time?

How can practitioners address some of the challenges related to family time and support all involved?

For infants,
family time
should feel:

- safe
- predictable
- comfortable



Parents' experience of family time

Family time felt:

- Intrusive
- Uncomfortable
- Unnatural
- Painful

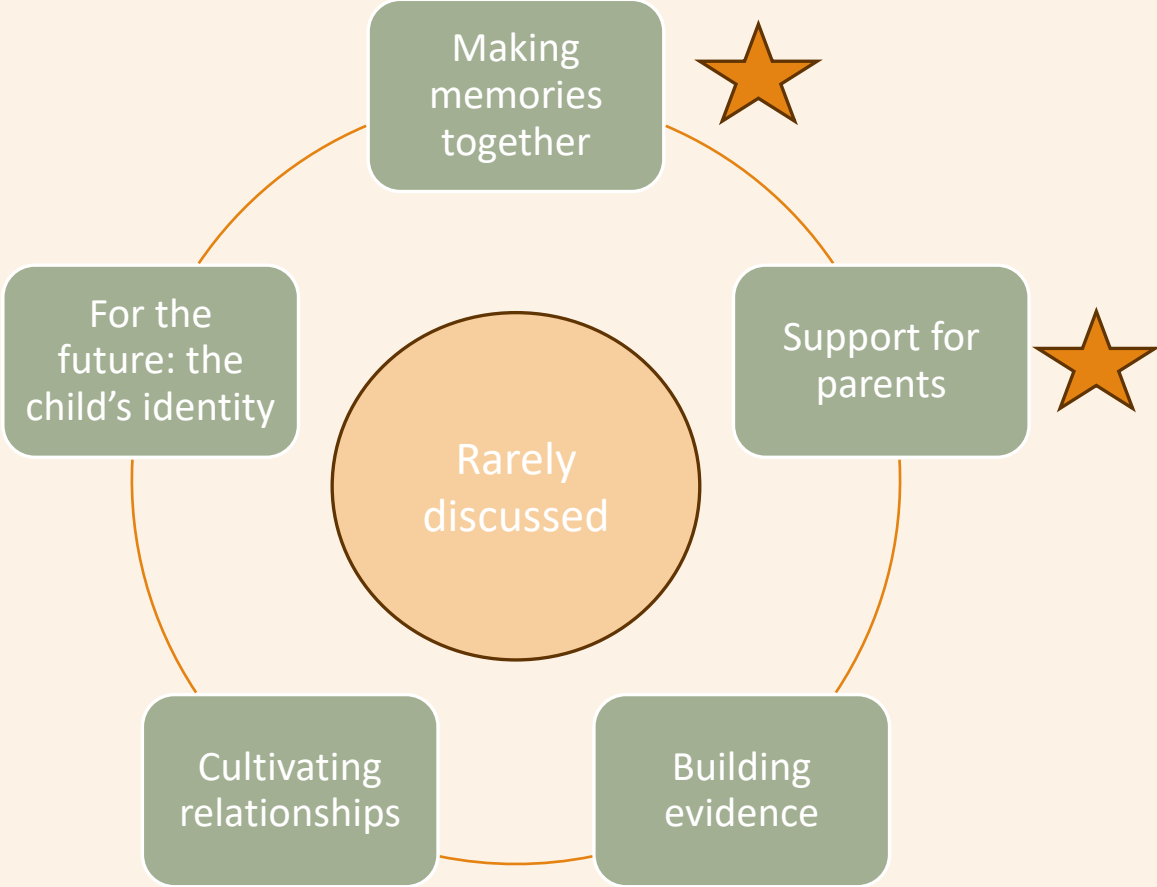
Parents' felt:

- Judged
- Shame
- Stigma

A mother's view of Family Time

'...it's not exactly the most relaxing environment to be in, especially when it normally comes not long after you've given birth, you've got a court case... coming up on the horizon, so you're stressed anyway, your hormones are all over the place and you know you're being reassessed at the same time, plus you also know that these people that are looking after your kid have already been preapproved to have 'em if you screw up...but...you're expected to then be the best version of yourself and...be able to show to these people that are supervising you and assessing you...that while you're going through...one of the toughest moments of your life...you're still supposed to try and show them that you're the best person for your child when at that present moment in time, you feel like your world's just been like ripped from under you.'

Purpose of Family Time



'to spend time with the children, to do things together'. Sophie

**Making
memories**

'...my favourite [supervisor]...he was just great...he was trying to advocate for me to be able to take Felix swimming and for me actually kind of tick off a bucket list of stuff to do with him before the end...' Zoe

Emotional and practical support

I feel sorry for Maggie, 'cause she used to get a lot of stick off me. Not directed at her... I'd have me little rants, so she used to get the brunt of it... but [I] love that woman...you get that proper Mum vibe off her...all she ever wanted was the best for me and for [my children]...she was there when I needed her...she came and met me after [my daughter was adopted] and had brought me loads of pictures [that we] had done over contact...and like a little book with some pictures of us in which was nice, and we went and had a brew [in] Tesco's... Nicola, mother.

You want [the contact supervisor] to be like supportive, you want them to kind of help you enjoy the emotion of the contact...I maybe wanted them to spend like another 15 minutes afterwards....even offered a cup of tea or something afterwards just to make sure that you were ok, that would have been a lot easier but no, they're just like alright good luck, go home. Zoe

The role of the family time supervisor



The observer

'...we generally sit back more and wouldn't get involved unless absolutely necessary, or if the parent asks...I'd love to do it more [offer support] but it's almost like a lot of the time you do have to sort of get the ok from the social worker.' FTS1



The supporter

'...[the supervisor] used to say like today we're doing bottles....that was nice because I remember...with me growing up seeing my Mum in a contact centre...we never had any of that, they just used to sit and...we're just running round like wild animals. [For me] it was my first child...I didn't have a clue myself...she got me out of me shell...she reassured me and pushed me....even though she had her job to do and maybe some things I disagreed on...she still had the parents interests at heart...' Jade

Relationships between parents and carers

Handovers

Risk aversity - ..we've been doing EP placements since 1999 and we'd always been doing the contact here until last year...the handovers are mostly safe. Sometimes social workers can be, I think, a little bit too oo [carers] can't do the handover to the birth parents because they're risky and I'll [ask] risky in what way in this context? It's like yes they take drugs and yes there's domestic violence, but are they aggressive towards professionals or...? (Contact manager)

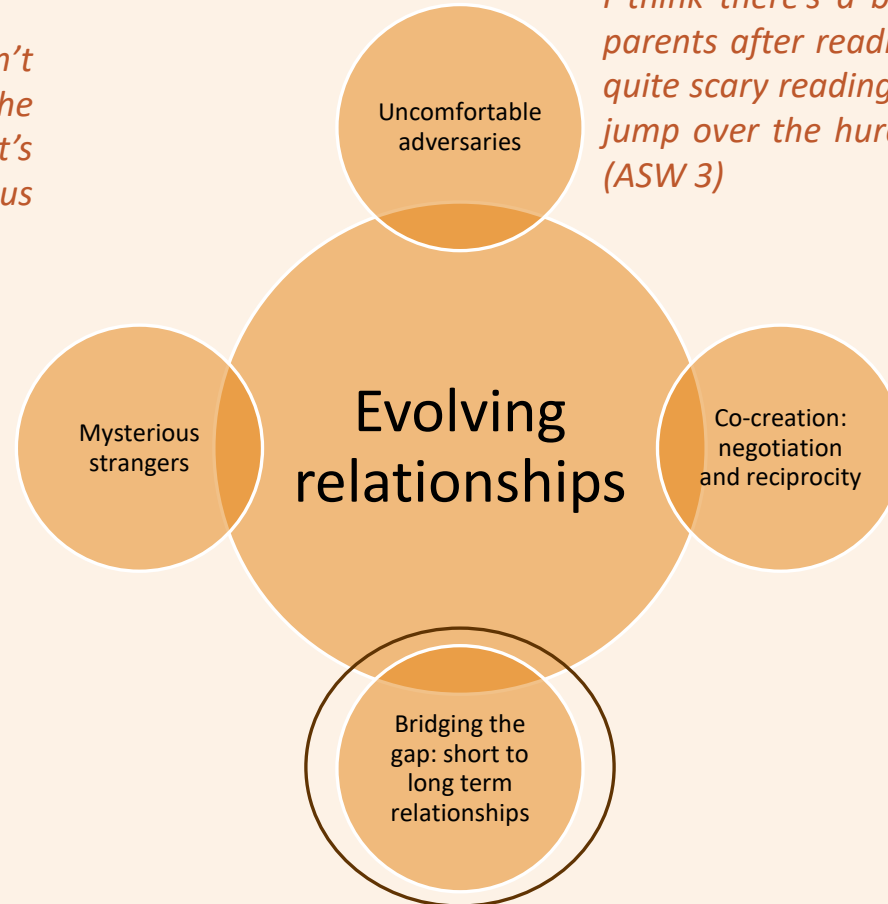
Relationships – parents and carers

'...so we've never met them really, you don't really know them, you're not going into the contact centre and then four months into it it's suddenly like an 'us and them' and it's not us and them....' Carer



I think when adopters just get the on paper description of their, of his birth parents, they don't know that Mum really likes Dumbo and that Dad is a painter/decorator and yeah, you know, those little facts that just get missed off and make them humans...
Lyndsey, Carer, Interview 1

*I think there's a bit of anxiety...a bit uncertainty about meeting birth parents after reading the information that they're provided...I think it's quite scary reading it all on paper...it's needing that encouragement [to] jump over the hurdle to actually you know, meet birth parents I think.
(ASW 3)*



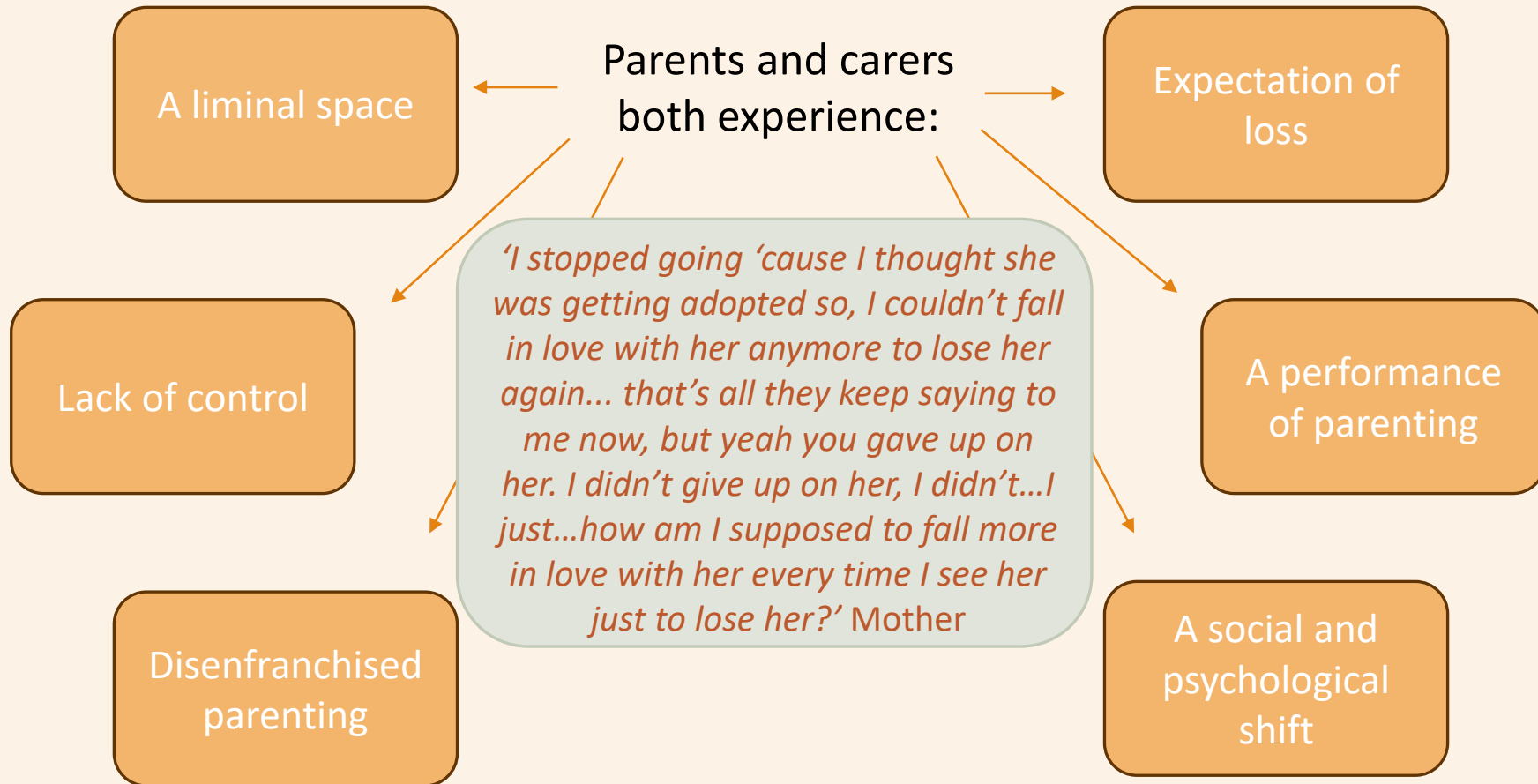
Short term > long term relationships

'the best bits of the process is after that final contact, knowing that I don't have to do it anymore' (Carer)

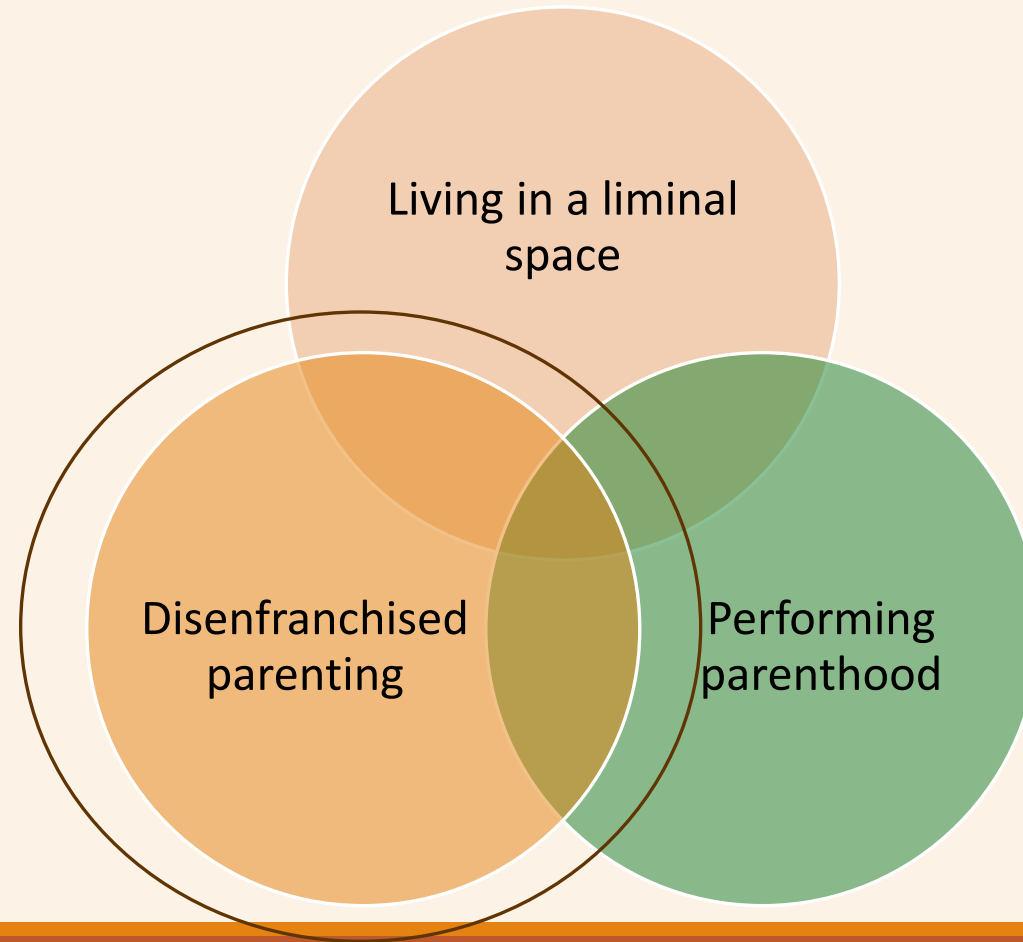
'...it was so lovely just to see this relationship kind of grow...what's really happened from it is that the foster to adopt carers are really invested in the life story and the life story of the other children as well and wanting to promote direct contact with the siblings and with the birth parents and actually that sense of self, you began to even build for the girls...was just amazing, absolutely amazing.' (CSW)

'...[adoptive mother] sent...me memory sticks of him riding his first bike so it's lovely...I have that opportunity to still see Joseph growing up and still be a part of that... I think because we had that relationship and I stuck with it, it's nice for them to give me that so I am happy.' Jade, mother

Navigating parental identity




Navigating parental identity



Summary points for practice

- **Look for opportunities for relationship building** and collaboration between parents and carers, breaking down barriers, avoiding division and focusing on building an alliance – ‘icebreaker meetings’.
- **Try not to be risk averse** when planning and managing family time, and when thinking about meetings between parents and carers.
- Take time to **really think about the function and purpose of family time in EP**, to support good quality, meaningful contact which is beneficial for both the child and parent/s.
- **Acknowledge and provide support with the emotional toll and additional uncertainty** that is present for both parents and carers in an EP placement, as well as the emotional investment that carers have in the child they are looking after.
- Help parents and carers navigate their respective **parental identities** during the EP process, with a particular focus on how it may feel for them both to come together at contact.
- **Highlight the positives to parents of EP for their child**, including how valuable it is to have carers loving their child as much as they do, linking back (in simple terms) to developmental theory.
- **Be creative and flexible** when thinking about planning and managing family time so it meets the needs of all those involved.

NW Model of good practice - Caroline



Small group discussions – 20 minutes

What does Family Time look like in EP placements in your experience?

- *Do parents and carers meet?*
- *Who supports these relationships?*
- *Think of an example of a successful relationship between parents and carers. Discuss what worked well.*
- *Think of an example of a more challenging relationship (direct or indirect) between parents and carers. Discuss how this was managed and what support was required.*
- *What are the barriers to successful relationships and how can these be overcome?*

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Please note, my PhD study is as yet unpublished (due for completion November 2024). If you would like any further information on my research or any other research on EP/family time, please contact me on r.copson@uea.ac.uk
