The Children's Society

Historic Adoption Practice at The Children's Society

December 2025

Introduction and context

The Children's Society has a long history of supporting children and young people and was founded in 1881 by Edward Rudolf. Rudolf dedicated his life to improving the lives of children and young people and, with the support of the Church of England, established small children's homes with the aim of providing those growing up in poverty with a loving and secure family environment. While the focus for The Children's Society was initially residential care for children, in 1935, The Children's Society became a registered adoption agency and by the 1960s it was one of the biggest adoption agencies in the UK. It continued to undertake adoption placement work until 2005. While The Children's Society is no longer involved directly in adoption, and trace and intermediary work ceased in 2016, it does offer post adoption support by providing adopted people access to their own records either directly or via local authorities or other adoption agencies. This service is regulated by Ofsted and works closely with The Children's Society's Records and Archives team who oversee the storage and retention of all adoption records.

The Children's Society wants to understand as much as possible about historic practice, particularly in relation to adoption and the notion of consent and coercion. Over the last year, the organisation's role in the adoption of babies and children, with a particular focus on the adoption of babies from unmarried mothers between the 1940s and 1970s, has been an area of consideration and reflection.

Terminology and context

Adoption is the legal process by which a child's legal relationship with their birth parents ends and they become a full, permanent and legal member of a new family. Adopters become the child's legal parents with the same rights and responsibilities as if the child was born to them.

'Forced adoption' is a term used by some birth parents, adopted people and organisations to describe their experience of the adoption process. The term refers to the permanent removal of a child without the consent of their parents, and often against their wishes. It is often used in relation to historic adoption practice and in particular to unmarried parents, especially women who state that they were not given a choice to keep their babies and did not have the support to do so. They describe being 'forced' to put their child up for adoption

by parents/families and/or professionals, having their children removed from them soon after giving birth and having little or no contact with their child from then on[1]. It is also a term used by some birth parents in relation to current adoption practices particularly following the intervention of local authorities and where the adoption is 'contested', and a parent or parents may feel that they have no agency even if they are legally represented.

The Children's Society refers to 'historic adoption practice' as opposed to 'forced adoption' but for the purposes of the review and the historic context in which the organisation undertook adoption related work, considers 'forced adoption' in terms of:

- forcible removal: the physically forced removal of a child from their birth mother
- coercion/coercive control: the use of manipulation, physical threats and coercion compelling a birth parent to comply or cooperate by relinquishing their child for adoption
- social coercion: familial, societal, governmental and institutional pressure which led to the forced separation of children from their families.

The UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report in 2022[2] highlighting the mistreatment of unmarried mothers and the ongoing struggles faced by those affected. Their conclusions refer to "the appalling way in which unmarried mothers were often treated by those whose job it was to help them" and demonstrates "the struggles that individuals continue to face every day in living with the impact" of this history. The report found that the Government was "ultimately responsible" for actions that inflicted harm on mothers and their children. The Government acknowledged the wrongdoing but did not issue a formal apology.

The Children's Society recognises the harm and impact that adoption has had and continues to have on adopted people, birth parents and the wider family. We are committed to acknowledging past mistakes and failures and believe that "…it's important that we talk openly about (our) history, learn the lessons of the past."[3] We want to understand more about the context and practice at that time, including the use of language. In line with the charity's values and behaviours, The Children's Society promotes transparency and a learning culture, firmly believing that the work of the past can inform our current delivery and support for children and young people.

[1] https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23076/documents/169043/default/
[2] Report by Joint Committee on Human Rights: The Violation of Family Lif: Adoption of Children of Unmarried Women 1949–1976, p34 https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23076/documents/169043/default/
[3] Our apology to victims of past abuse, The Children's Society website https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/our-apology

Review

In 2024, The Children's Society's board of trustees commissioned an external review into historic adoption practice, considering a sample of children's adoption records. The Children's Society has chosen to publicly share this summary of the review. Our aim is to promote learning in the open, share high level findings and actions we have committed to.

Aims of the review

- to review The Children's Society's historic adoption practice and the notion of consent and coercion
- to consider the role of The Children's Society towards unmarried mothers, fathers and the family network
- to consider the impact of ethnicity on children's outcomes and experiences of their mothers
- to consider compliance with legislation and statutory guidance
- to inform next steps for The Children's Society.

The review focused on children's adoption records from 1949 to 1976, examining 56 records in total, and involved extensive support from the organisation's dedicated Records and Archives team.

Historic context

Legislative framework

In order to understand more about the context in which adoption practices were undertaken during this period, it is helpful to consider the legislative framework of the time. The 1926 Adoption Act[4] saw the introduction of formal regulations for adoption for the first time but, despite this, concerns persisted about unlicensed adoption practice and the methods used by adoption societies. For example, some agencies were involved in the selling of babies and charging fees to mothers and fathers. In 1939, the law was amended[5], which gave local authorities more responsibility for adoption, marking a shift towards central government policy. However, voluntary adoption systems linked to religious organisations, such as the Church of England, the Catholic Church and the Salvation Army, continued to play a significant role.

The Adoption Act 1949[6] further centralised adoption arrangements under local authorities and introduced a six-week timescale for the mother's consent, ostensibly to protect adoptive parents' interests. It also required a Justice of the Peace to give consent to adoption and allow mothers to have their children returned to their care during a three-month trial period. The Act also introduced a level of secrecy in adoption practice[7], such as concealing adoptive parents' identities. In 1954, the Hurst Committee[8] raised concerns about the 1949 legislation, suggesting that voluntary adoption agencies might prioritise adoptive parents' needs over the child's best interests. This led to the introduction of the Adoption Act 1958[9], which made changes to consent, requirements of adopters, and adoption procedures, and required a guardian ad litem[10] to be involved in the legal process.

[4] Adoption of Children Act 1926 - https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/16-17/29/enacted
[5] Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act 1939 (Hansard) - https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/adoption-of-children-regulation-act-1939
[6] Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act 1939 (Hansard) - https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/adoption-of-children-regulation-act-1939
[7] Sandhu J. The birth mother and the evolution of adoption policy and practice in England since 1926. Nottingham University; 2012, p23. (consent given to use in this review).
[8] Report of the departmental committee on the adoption of children : Great Britain. Home Office. Committee on the adoption of children :Internet Archive - https://archive.org/details/b32172904
[9] ia800600.us.archive.org/19/items/b32181000/b32181000.pdf
[10] The legal term *guardian ad litem* ("GAL") refers to an individual appointed by the court to represent the best interests of a minor child in legal proceedings.

Societal attitudes and influences

During the 1940s, The Children's Society was part of the moral welfare movement, whose foundations were strongly linked to Christianity. Unmarried mothers were considered a social problem, responsible for their own actions and therefore denied access to support and services. Illegitimate pregnancy was rooted in shame and stigma[11] [12].

Most adoptive parents sought to adopt babies, which meant that older children, children with learning disabilities, disabled children and children from the global majority were often not considered adoptable and remained in foster homes or children's homes. The influence of the notion of 'bad blood'[13] and the genetic transference of poor morals from mother to child meant that children available for adoption were often seen as different from 'normal' children and there was a preference for keeping children within their own class[14]. Also influential at the time was the child guidance movement[15], which viewed children as problems and contributed to the pathologisation of children. It reinforced the practice of waiting to see how children developed before placing them for adoption.

During the 1950s and 1960s, there was criticism of housing provisions which were deemed inadequate, biased against single persons and single mothers, and oriented towards the nuclear family[16]. Also at this time, the emphasis on adoption shifted from addressing the problems caused by illegitimacy to providing 'perfect children' for infertile couples. Attitudes towards heredity and 'bad blood' began to change, and more middle-class adoptive parents were approved. However, prejudices persisted, and children with special educational needs and disabilities, or from the global majority[17] continued to be less likely to be adopted. Despite recruitment drives, most adoptions of children of the global majority were by White British couples[18].

In the 1970s, the context changed significantly, with greater emphasis on child welfare and safeguarding. John Bowlby's[19] work on maternal deprivation and attachment theory influenced adoption practice, emphasising early adoption and the importance of keeping children with their mothers. The concept of 'open adoption' developed, promoting transparency and ongoing contact with birth families. Furthermore, fewer children were available for adoption due to the increased availability of contraception, the legalisation of abortion, the introduction of employment rights relating to pregnancy and more support for single parents, as well as changing views on the notion of family.

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[11] Sandhu, 2012 op cit.
[12] Report by Joint Committee on Human Rights, op cit, p34.
[13] Sandhu, 2012 op cit.
[14] Adoption in a Child Care Agency, CW Stone, 1973.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Sandhu, 2012 op cit.
[17] The term Global majority refers to black, Asian, brown, dual heritage, indigenous to the global south, and/or have been racialised as 'ethnic minorities'" and represent approximately 80% of the world's population.
[18] Sandhu, 2012 op cit.
[19] (PDF) The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth

Findings of the review

The Children's Society's independent review examined 56 historic adoption records. Among the records reviewed, ten mothers were married, and the child was conceived through an extramarital relationship. Some pregnancies occurred within what was perceived as a settled relationship, while other mothers described more casual relationships resulting in conception. Two records referred to the child being conceived from rape with no evidence of police involvement; one assault occurred abroad. Most mothers were White British, and their ages ranged from 13 to 38 years, with two mothers below the age of consent at the time of conception.

The Children's Society historic adoption practice and notion of consent and coercion

The Children's Society was not the first point of contact for most mothers, and the majority were put in touch with the organisation by a third party because they had said that they wanted their child to be adopted. The Children's Society supported mothers by admitting children to their nursery provision (or foster care) when they had nowhere else to go. Mothers were expected to contribute financially to their child's care where they could. Some were offered grants, but others were proactively pursued for payments. Some mothers were hoping to have their babies back and saw the nursery placement as an opportunity for them to try and find a way to keep their child by either securing employment, accommodation and/or hoping to meet someone to marry who would take on the child. There is evidence within some of the records of children returning to their mother's care for these reasons and of The Children's Society's workers advocating for trying to keep mother and child together. However, where this was not possible, a plan for adoption was progressed.

While the review noted that consent was sought and obtained from the mother, the context often meant that, for some mothers, there was a lack of meaningful choice[20] due to the societal and family pressures, the stigma around 'illegitimacy', access to abortion and contraception, as well as lack of access to housing and financial benefits for single parents. From the review, there is little evidence of mothers (and fathers) being aware of their rights and it is often unclear to what extent options were discussed with some of the mothers. Mothers (and indeed fathers) did not have legal representation and therefore it is not surprising that they felt that they had little choice or autonomy. Mothers recorded reason for agreeing to adoption was often that it was in the best interest of the child to be brought up by two parents, believing the child would have increased stability if they were brought up by

[20] The term meaningful choice is explored in Report by Joint Committee on Human Rights: The Violation of Family Life: Adoption of Children of Unmarried Women 1949–1976, p36
https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/23076/documents/169043/default/

two parents. Some mothers would not give consent to adoption and these children remained in care. Some children were returned to their mother's care and on occasion this led to mothers making other plans for the child, for example, for them to be privately adopted.

Adoptive parents were expected to be married, of childbearing age, and churchgoers. The approval process involved detailed scrutiny, but preparation for adoptive parents was often lacking. While some consideration was given to the mother's views on matching, decisions were largely influenced by the child's characteristics and the adoptive parents' preferences, often prioritising the latter over the child's best interests.

Mothers, fathers and the family network

Some of the mothers appeared to be living in poverty, with descriptions of overcrowded housing and a lack of support. While many mothers had working parents who might be considered working or middle class, financial circumstances and the availability of suitable accommodation were a significant factor for the mothers and whether they could support themselves and the baby. Many of the mothers were in employment or had given up employment because they were pregnant. More often than not, this was not by choice.

The mothers' plans were often responsive and appeared to be based on the reactions of their families, in particular the mother's parents as well as marital status, and opportunities to marry.

Details about fathers varied significantly. In some cases, fathers were not identified or were uninvolved and ethnicity was often unknown. Where fathers were known, their involvement and financial responsibility were inconsistent. Very few fathers signed consent forms, and efforts to trace them were variable, often influenced by the mother's wishes and family circumstances.

Impact of ethnicity on children's outcomes and experiences of their mothers

Several pregnancies were concealed, and many children experienced rejection and inadequate care both before and after birth. Children from the global majority faced additional racism and prejudice, particularly where the father was described as being from the global majority.

Secrecy and shame were recurring themes in the records. Some mothers hoped to regain custody by securing employment, housing, or marriage, and there is evidence of children returning to maternal care for these reasons. Where this was not possible, adoption plans were progressed.

Post adoption, most children had their names changed and there is little evidence of what they were told about their histories. There is also evidence of the impact of trauma on some of the children's records. Furthermore, the review found evidence of institutional racism, particularly in the adoption of children from the global majority. These children were often placed in foster care rather than being directly adopted, reflecting societal prejudices at the time. Derogatory language and attitudes were prevalent, and they faced longer waits for adoption and more instability.

Compliance with legislation and statutory guidance

The review confirmed that The Children's Society's historic adoption practice was underpinned by the legislative framework and suggests that practice approaches reflected cultural and societal norms at the time. Personal opinions of professionals were and could be moralistic and judgmental, and the language used reflected past attitudes. While The Children's Society provided support to mothers and cared for their children, it is acknowledged that social attitudes and particularly stigma relating to unmarried mothers and a lack of suitable social support at the time resulted in some mothers feeling pressured to relinquish their babies. The Children's Society was part of the system that engendered this practice and recognises the harm this has caused adopted people and birth parents.

Summary and next steps

This review has spotlighted historic adoption practice and provided valuable insight into the practice at The Children's Society. It highlights the following:

- the societal pressures faced by mothers, whether this be their family, the local community, wider society, financial circumstances and/or access to suitable housing
- the experience of mothers as one where they lacked 'meaningful choice' and often suffered stigma and shame
- how fathers were often overlooked
- there was evidence of institutional racism which impacted care planning and led to delays in some children being adopted and some children not being considered for adoption
- the use of derogatory language and attitudes towards global majority children and adults.

Although adoption practice has changed, the term 'forced adoption'[21] is still used by some to describe current adoption practice. The current President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane noted that "some elements of the culture surrounding it still remain in the modern approach to adoption"[22].

The Children's Society no longer places children for adoption but continues to support adopted adults, birth parents, adoptive parents and wider family through the Post Adoption Support Service which currently supports adopted adults and descendants to access their records. Through this work we are privileged to hear from adopted people about their experience of adoption and while we hear about positive adoption experiences, we also see the impact that adoption has had on adopted people, birth parents and wider family.

The Children's Society agree with Sir Andrew McFarlane that if adoption is to continue to be part of the child welfare system there needs to be further change "in particular with regard to provision for a continuing relationship with and knowledge of the birth family, with the child's needs being at the centre of all that we do. Every adopted child has a right to no less"[23].

Learning from this review will help inform the organisations practice today, whether this is through the direct support we offer children and young people, the language we use and the need to advocate on behalf of those who are marginalised.

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[21] The Children's Society does not use this terminology – preferring 'historic adoption practice'.

[22] Adapting Adoption to the Modern World, Sir Andrew McFarlane

[23] Ibid.

We remain committed to exploring our history and will support individuals and their families to understand their history.

The Children's Society acknowledge our role in historic adoption practices which, while considered standard at the time, have caused harm. Where we have made mistakes, we will recognise and accept that we were wrong.