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Title: The development of the Strengths and Risks Matching Tool for Adoption in the United Kingdom

Running title: Strengths and Risks Matching Tool

Abstract

Identifying the strengths and risks of prospective matches in adoption is crucial to adoption placement stability (Quinton, 2012). With the aim to deliver a consistent and service-led approach to matching children in care with prospective adopters, a tool to identify strengths and risks related to adoption placement was developed. Using a mixed-methods approach, this tool was developed in line with psychometric theory of test construction, from item generation using semi-structured interviews and survey methods, and exploratory factor analysis to determine the factor structure of the assessment to assessment of retest reliability and finalization. Comprising three main components (adopter capabilities and skills, adopter profiles and characteristics, and adoption plans, preparations, and transitions) this tool can be used by practitioners to identify strengths and risks in proposed matches at any pint during the linking and matching process.

Keywords

Adoption, Qualitative research, Quantitative research, Strengths based practice

Introduction

The main purpose of adoption today is to 'provide security and permanent family relationships for some of society's most vulnerable children' (Thomas, 2013). In the United Kingdom, a local authority can apply to the court for a 'care order' for a child understood to be suffering from, or at risk of, significant harm, under the UK's 1989 Children Act. An independent social worker will

then be appointed as guardian and a solicitor will be assigned to represent the child to determine

where the child should reside and who should care for them.

Children subjected to such a care order are described as 'looked after' or 'in care'. In England,

Wales and Northern Ireland the definition of looked after refers to 'children in out-of-home care

supervised by a local authority' (McGhee et al., 2018). A total of 80,850 children were in the care

of local authorities in England in 2021: 66% for reasons of abuse or neglect, 14% for family

dysfunction, 8% due to families in acute distress, and 5% for absent parenting (UK Governement,

2021). Most looked after children (71%) live in foster placements including with foster friends or

relatives (15%) and fostering by another carer (56%), while others are accommodated in secure

units (4%), with parents (7%), children homes and semi-independent living arrangements (4%) or

placed for adoption (3%) (UK Government, 2021).

In the UK, authorities are required to provide a permanence plan for any child in care (UK

Government, 2010). The court may make a placement order if it is determined that the child is at

significant risk and that needs of the child can't be met by the parents or extended family within a

reasonable timescale and that the long-term welfare needs of the child would be best met by

adoption, appointing a child social worker as guardian and solicitor to represent the child. The

local authority is authorized by the placement order to place a child with approved prospective

adoptive parents. The rights of the child are predicated on the needs and welfare of the child and

are at the heart of all decisions relating to adoption (UK Government, 2002). Recommendation

decisions for child adoption are taken by the department of social services who maintain case

responsibility for the child. A total of 2,870 children were adopted in the year preceding March

2021 (UK Government, 2021). The average time for a child between entering care and being

placed for adoption is 16 months, with a further 10 months for the granting of an adoption order

to complete the adoption (UK Government, 2021). Delays in adoption placements can occur where birth parents do not give their consent to an adoption order and contest assessments and judgements made by social services in the lower courts (Doughty, 2015).

Adoption reports are conducted by 'Act Qualified' professionals (a social worker who is employed by a local authority or registered adoption agency who has completed social work qualifications approved by the English or Welsh Councils, has had at least three years' post-qualifying experience in child care social work, including direct experience of adoption work, and is supervised by a qualified social worker employed by the same local authority or registered adoption agency with at least three year's post-qualifying experience in child care or social work, including direct experience of adoption social work) (UK Government, 2005). 'Child social workers' are Act Qualified professionals representing children in care and adoption social workers are Act Qualified professionals representing prospective adopters.

Using the Child Permanence Record (CPR), child social workers obtain information on child characteristics, ethnic and religious background, family history and care chronology, psychosocial development and current circumstances as well as descriptive and evaluative information (Quinton, 2012). The CPR contains assessments of child needs detailed by both the Adoption and Permanence Taskforce (UK Government, 2004) and the Assessment Framework (UK Government, 2000), including: health needs, education needs, emotional and behavioral development, needs, identity needs, family and social relationship needs, attachment needs, contact needs, self-care needs, accommodation needs and any other specific needs to the child. Statutory requirements (UK Government, 2013) emphasize the 'importance of the accuracy of the CPR since it will not only form the basis on which decisions are made about whether the child

should be placed for adoption but will also assist the agency in matching the child with an appropriate prospective adopter.'

Prospective adopters must engage in a two-stage adoption assessment process established by the Department for Education (UK Government, 2013) with guidelines for preparation (stage 1) and assessment (stage 2) over a timescale of approximately 6 months. In the first stage statutory references including background and medical checks are completed before a formal application to adopt is made. Preparatory training focuses on child development, birth families, understanding and managing behavior as well as reflection on how one's own experiences and background may influence parenting. Prospective adopters with successful applications are assigned an adoption social worker to manage the assessment process. In the second stage, several home visits are arranged with a focus on the assessment of the skills, experiences and support network of the prospective adopters. All assessments are detailed in the Prospective Adopter's Report (PAR) which specifies adopter characteristics identified by the Adoption Agencies Regulations that must be taken into account, including: (Section A) basic demographic and family information; (Section B) evaluation and suitability of applicants; (Section C) other reports including family tree, ecomaps, chronology, preparation, home study, medical report, referees; (Section D) reference checks; (Section E) adoption competencies (this includes the prospective adopter's capacity to care for children, to provide a caring and safe environment, to work as part of a team with individuals and organizations, to see adoption as a lifelong process, and to attend to one's own development) (Quinton, 2012) and is in line with Department for Education and Skills (UK Government, 2006) guidance on Preparing and Assessing Prospective Adopters.

While one or more prospective families are identified as having the capacity to meet the needs of a particular child through linking processes, a local authority determines one family to be

most suitable to meeting the needs of a specific child through matching processes (Dance et al., 2010). According to the Statutory Guidance on Adoption: 'Making a good match between a child and prospective adopter is a highly skilled task and is vital for both the child and the prospective adopter' (UK Government, 2013). The decision regarding whether a proposed match can proceed is determined by a Matching Panel, which takes into consideration all documents including the Adoption Placement Report (APR) which details a profile of child and summary of family finding, a profile of prospective adopter/s, areas considered in matching (including specific needs of the child and the ability of prospective adopters to meet those needs), details of the adoptive and birth families, and prospective adopters' views.

In a review of 149 case files of children recommended for adoption in 10 local authorities and follow-up interviews regarding 67 cases with case workers and families using two independent raters the quality of matches was rated according to "how much compromise had been made on the matching requirements for the child or on the adopter's preferences" (Farmer and Dance, 2016). While most matches were of good quality - 27% were identified as of fair or poor quality, requiring compromise on the part of the adoptive families with poorer outcomes 6 months later related to poor quality matches (Farmer and Dance, 2016). Disruption to placements carries significant risks to children. Mismatches between families and children are identified as a factor in disruption, particularly with respect to expectations and parental lack of skills and ability to manage the behavioral or psychological needs of the children (Hanna and McRoy, 2011).

A survey of experiences of nearly 3000 adopters (Evans, 2018) revealed that while nearly three quarters of the respondents described their experience of adoption as either 'challenging but stable' or 'fulfilling and stable,' -- more than a quarter were facing 'serious challenges that had an impact on the wider family,' were 'at risk of breakdown or disruption' or had 'already disrupted'.

While this provides a useful snapshot of the experiences of adopters drawn from a large sample, it does not detail the specific challenges experienced by the family or the reasons specified for the risk of breakdown or disruption.

There exists a paucity of research that explores factors predicting adoption placement stability and disruption, with some exceptions. With the aim to explore factors in making a good match, factors that preclude a match, and barriers to linking and matching, open-ended questions were asked on an online survey conducted by Dance et al. (2010) with of 74 local authorities and 29 voluntary agencies in England and Wales. Themes relating to practice, process and organization (i.e., accurate information about the child, stretching of adopter preferences), adopters' characteristics (i.e., support network, birth children), and adopters' attitudes and understanding (i.e., realistic expectations, flexibility) emerged. While the qualitative data suggest themes regarded by professionals as pertinent to the matching process, it does not indicate the relative strength of each theme in determining the outcome of successful or unsuccessful matches.

Identifying the strengths and risks of prospective matches in adoption is crucial to adoption placement stability and outcome success (Quinton, 2012). However, in the survey of 74 local authorities and 29 voluntary agencies in England and Wales conducted by Dance et al. (2010) considerable variation in matching practices was revealed. While 70% of agencies used a formalized meeting to discuss matches, they were not used in all cases and decision about which family to proceed with ultimately rested with the child's allocated social worker. Only 10 of the authorities reported using a structured method for linking and matching assessment to consider information in an objective manner (which were not used consistently by the authorities) and only 4 of the agencies reported using grids or matrices to compare children's needs with adopters' capacities. The authors concluded: 'matching as a task is relatively unexplored and conceptually

underdeveloped'. At the core of child protection systems – whether the UK, Netherlands, US, Spain, or Russian Federation – are the core aims of seeking permanence and stability for the child (Palacios et al., 2019). Finding a permanent home for children in care relies on systems of matching to determine the skills and capacities of prospective adopters to meet the needs of the child. Realistic expectations focused on the needs of the child (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2019) and an understanding of the risk and protective factors related to a proposed match is key to disruption prevention and placement stability (Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2019).

With the aim to support Adoption Workers and minimize adoption disruptions, a consistent and service-led approach to matching is needed. Collaborating with local authorities and voluntary agencies across the South West Adoption Consortium in England, taking a service-led approach, the aim of this study is to develop a matching tool to identify the strengths and risks for proposed matches between prospective adopters and children in care.

Method

Using a mixed-methods approach, a strengths and risks matching tool for adoption was developed in three stages. In Stage 1, semi-structured interview and questionnaire survey methods were used to generate items for the first version of the strengths and risks matching tool. In Stage 2, Act Qualified professionals used the tool to rate their confidence in existing and recent matches. To determine the factor structure, the items were subjected to Principal Components Analysis (PCA) using Varimax rotation. The re-test reliability of the tool was determined in stage 3. All stages were approved by the University research ethics committee, including informed consent, in line with British Psychological Society research ethics requirements and GDPR regulations.

Stage 1: Item generation for draft tool

Themes identified as relevant to Act Qualified professionals with prospective adopters were identified in two substages: semi-structured interview; and survey methods.

Semi-structured interviews

Purposive sampling (Kalton, 1983) was used by inviting 12 senior Act Qualified professionals across the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) from 12 different locations (7 local authorities and 5 voluntary adoption agencies) to take part. In line with Bearman (2019), the interview schedule was designed to explore 'core' events related to the phenomena of interest, in this case, factors related to subjectively perceived 'good' and 'poor' matches, and those, by experience, related to placement stability and disruption.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and data-driven thematic analysis was used to allow themes to emerge from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The structure of the analysis was facilitated using the software NVivo. Participants were asked to identify factors relevant to successful and unsuccessful matches and what they have learned from disruptions. Themes raised by 25% or more of the sample were included as items in the first draft of the Strengths and Risks tool.

Survey

The semi-structured interviews were followed by an online survey that included themes identified as key to successful and unsuccessful outcomes derived from a free-text open ended survey with 74 local authority and 29 voluntary agencies conducted by Dance et al. (2010). Participants were asked to rate the importance of each factor in successful matching and unsuccessful matching /disrupted placements on a scale from 0 (= not at all) to 10 (= completely) with the opportunity for free text explanation for each. Factors ranked at 5/10 or higher in terms of importance were included as items in the first draft of the tool.

Stage 2: Identifying components and item reduction

Items generated in the first stage were amalgamated into one assessment tool. The scale consisted of an information sheet describing the academic rationale, aims procedure and ethics address, consent form, questions regarding role and location (local authority or adoption agency) and the 41 strengths and risks in adoption matching items derived from stage one to be rated on a scale from 0 (=not at all) to 4 (=completely) and debrief information. Act Qualified professionals across the South West Adoption Consortium were invited to take part to complete the first draft version of the tool for recent and current matches using purposive sampling.

In total 87 scales were completed representing current and recent matches considered by professionals that are responsible for matching. Participants were recruited from across 12 Local authorities and 5 Adoption Agencies from the South West Adoption Consortium. 18 (22%) of the scales were completed by child social workers, 39 (47.6%) by adoption social workers, 18 (22%) by family finding social workers, 3 (3.4%) by adoption service managers, (3.4%) by adoption service practitioners, and 1 (1.1%) by an adoption team manager. The role of the practitioner was not declared on 5 of the completed scales. 47 (55.3%) of the scales pertained to matches within a local authority and 37 (42.5%) to matches within an adoption agency. The location of the match was not declared in three of the completed scales.

Principal Components Analysis PCA with Varimax rotation was used to determine the factor structure and reduce the scale to the most discriminating items (Cohen et al., 2017; Shah & Yeoh, 2018). Noting factors with eigenvalues greater than 3, items with factor loadings of 0.6 or greater were retained (Cohen et al., 2017; Shah & Yeoh, 2018). Components with three or more items and an acceptable internal consistency (i.e., Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.65$) were retained for subscale construction, in line with Cohen et al. (2017) and Shah and Yeoh (2018).

Stage 3: Retest reliability

Items retained in the first stage contributed to the second version of the Strengths and Risks matching tool for adoption. The scale consisted of an information sheet describing the academic rationale, aims procedure and ethics address, consent form, questions regarding role and location (local authority or adoption agency), a prompt question to match pairs, and the 37 retained strengths and risks in adoption matching items retained in stage two to be rated on a scale from 0 (=not at all) to 4 (=completely) and debrief information. Act Qualified professionals across the South West Adoption Consortium were invited to take part to complete the second draft version of the tool twice for current matches during the most stable period of the matching process to determine the retest reliability of the tool. Participants were asked to complete the tool at any time from the agreement of the matching panel (Time 1) and a second time with a minimum of one-week interval (Time 2) provided there was no further information that came to light that might impact on the rating of the scale. In total 43 matched scales were completed. Participants were recruited from across 12 Local authorities and 5 Adoption Agencies from the South West Adoption Consortium. 19 (21%) of the scales were completed by child social workers, 19 (44.2%) by adoption social workers, 11 (25.6%) by family finding social workers and 4 (9.3%) by assessing social workers. 13 (30.2%) of the scales pertained to matches within a local authority and 30 (69.8%) to matches within an adoption agency. Bivariate correlations (Pearson's r) were used to determine the reliability of each item at the two time points. Items with the lowest retest reliability on each factor were discarded (Burnett & Fanshawe, 1997).

The new data set was subjected to repeated Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation (again retaining factors with eigenvalues greater than 3 and items with factor loadings of

0.6 or greater) to determine if the component structure identified in stage two still fit the model, in line with Ferguson and Takane (1989) and Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

Findings

Stage 1: Item generation for draft tool

Items for the draft tool were generated by two substages: semi-structured interview; and survey methods. In total 41 themes emerged from at least 25% of the interview sample (33 items) and / or were given an average rating of 5/10 or higher in the survey (15 items) based previous research (Dance et al., 2010), with 7 items that overlapped (themes arose in the preceding interview that were also in the survey based on the work by Dance et al. (2010).

Semi structured interviews

A total of 33 themes emerged, each representing the views of at least one quarter of the sample, in the semi-structured interviews (with 7 themes that overlapped with the survey based previous research (Dance et al., 2010). Table 1 details each theme, the percentage of the sample that raised each theme, and an example quote pertaining to each theme in the interviews [Insert Table 1 here].

Survey

A total of 15 items in the survey based on the work by Dance et al. (2010) were given an average rating of 5/10 or higher, with 7 items that overlapped with themes in the preceding semi-structured interviews. Table 2 details each item and the average rating by the sample for each item. [Insert Table 2 here].

Stage 2: Identifying components and item reduction

Three components with an eigenvalue >3 were revealed by Principle Components Analysis using Varimax Rotation, explaining 89.18% of the variance (37.4%, 26.47% and 25.31%, respectively).

A clear break after the third component was revealed by an inspection of the scree plot and these three components were retained using Cattell's scree test (1996).

Components with three or more items and an acceptable internal consistency (α > 0.65) were retained. Four items with insufficient factor loadings (<0.6) were dropped. All three components had more than three items with good internal consistency (α = 0.92, 0.87 and 0.89, respectively). Component 1 had 17 items that clustered around themes relating to "Adopter capabilities and skills. Component 2 had 10 items relating to "Adopter profile and characteristics." Component 3 had 10 items relating to themes of "Plans, preparations and transitions." Table 3 shows the three retained components and the item loadings. [Insert Table 3 here].

Stage 3: Reliability of items and finalizing the scale

In total 43 scales were completed twice with a minimum one-week interval (from time of agreement of match to proceed to matching panel) by professionals that are responsible for matching children in care to adopters across the South West of England. Bivariate correlation was used to test the reliability of the items. The retest reliability for all items ranged from r = .36 to 0.91. The reliability of the retained items ranged from 0.66 to 0.99 (p < 0.05). Three items with insufficient reliability (r < 0.4, p > 0.05) were discarded. Principal Components Analysis PCA with Varimax rotation (Ferguson & Takane, 1989) was conducted, explaining 91.65% of the total variance, confirming the original three-factor structure model (each component explained 66.77%, 13.60% and 11.27% of the total variance, respectively).

The final version of the STrengths And Risks (STAR) adoption matching tool has a total of 34 items with three components (16 items comprising 'Adopter capabilities and skills', 9 items comprising 'Adopter profile and characteristics', and 9 items comprising 'Plans, preparations and transitions').

Completing the scale usually takes 15 minutes or less. Scores can be obtained for the total scale, subscales and individual items. While there is no threshold score for a 'good match', in the sample in which the scale was developed, the mean sum score of STAR was 116.06 (S.D =11.38) [minimum score = 100, maximum score = 136]. On the subscales, mean sum scores were 50.1(SD = 5.4) for 'Adopter capabilities and skills', 34.4 (SD = 3.77) on 'Adopter profile and characteristics', and 28.63 (SD = 11.39) on 'Plans, preparations and transitions'.

Discussion

The first component, 'Adopter capabilities and skills', emphasizes the ability of the prospective adopter to meet the needs of the child (i.e., social needs, emotional and behavioral need) and the capability and skill required to manage the especial challenges that may come with adoptive parenting (i.e., realistic expectations of the unknown challenges, disruptive behavior and potential painful disclosure and resilience and demonstrated ability to face challenges and difficulties). As there is a strong link between early deprivation and the chance of becoming looked after (McGhee et al., 2018) the needs of children in care are often complex. Among adopted children, early adversity predicts enduring emotional and behavioral problems in childhood, including post traumatic mental health symptoms (Paine et al., 2021). A systematic review by Brown et al. (2017) revealed that compared with non-adopted children, adopted children exhibit higher levels of behavior problems with lower academic attainment across childhood, adolescence and emerging adulthood. Research evidence consistently demonstrates an association between adoption disruption risk and family factors such as domestic violence and child maltreatment and child related factors such as behavior difficulties (Selwyn et al., 2014). Sharma et al. (1996) explored the emotional and social adjustment of 4682 adopted adolescents in the US revealing that as age at adoption increased, the level of overall adoptee adjustment decreased. Based on interviews with

102 children adopted between the ages of eight and ten, Soares et al. (2019) explored the experiences of adapting to post adoption life, revealing the complex and often ambivalent experiences of older children and the need for adopters to have the skills and capacities to help them 'make sense' of their life stories.

Items relating to the second component, 'Adopter profile and characteristics' relate to the adopter's motivation (i.e., reflection on, and resolution of, their reasons for adoption and preferences are not stretched) and child-centered approach to adoption (i.e., commitment to the long-term needs of the child, readiness of adopters to prioritize the needs of the child over their own emotional or lifestyle needs. Cousins (2003) highlighted a 'fundamental mismatch' between the characteristics of children available for adoption and the 'kinds' of children whom adopters seek to adopt, and the limitations of adopter assessment and child profiling calling for an approach that is 'led by the needs of the real child' as opposed to 'hypothetical matching' categories and a process that tends to highlight child 'deficits', failing to portray the 'whole child'.

The final component, 'Plans, preparations and transitions' refers to the importance of information (i.e., information regarding the personal history and needs of the child is as detailed, specific and up to date as possible and good communication between all parties), planning (i.e., quality of introduction plan and quality of support plan) and transition and
preparation for the child and receiving household (i.e., preparation of child for introduction and consideration of proposed match on existing birth children and adopted children). Beyond 'general preparation for adoption', Rushton and Monck (2009) emphasize the importance of preparing for the adoption of a particular child– to take account the best means, timing, preparation and support needed for best outcomes. An in-depth survey of 319 adoptive parents conducted by Neil et al. (2020) revealed detrimental effects resulting from poorly managed transitions. A systematic

review of Liao (2016) of empirical post-permanency outcomes revealed the importance of adoption preparation as a protective factor affecting adoption and guardianship adjustment. The importance of pre-adoption training and post-adoption support was highlighted by Moyer and Goldberg (2017) where adoptive parents expressed especial stress where there was a lack of preparation and support for the unexpected needs of the child.

Implications for practice

The STrengths and Risks (STAR) matching tool for adoption was developed to support the practice of Act Qualified professionals to identify strengths and risks in proposed matches and can be used at any point during the linking and matching process for a variety of purposes. Social workers using the tool can consider scores for each question, each subscale and/or a whole score. The total STAR score can be obtained by adding the scores for each of the 34 questions (range 0-136). The differences for each subscale can also be considered. These scores can be obtained by summing the items for each section: theme 1 (range 0-60), theme 2 (range 0-40) and theme 3 (range 0- 36). While there is no threshold to denote a 'good' match, the relative difference between scorings provides the opportunity for professionals to reflect on their confidence in the relative strengths and risks regarding each proposed match and each family. In practice, the STAR tool can be used at any point during the linking and matching process. This tool could be used to shortlist in the linking process when considering more than one prospective adoptive family or foster carers wishing to adopt a child in their care. To identify gaps in information within the Prospective Adopter's Report (PAR) in relation to the proposed link this tool can also be used. Act Qualified professionals can use the tool to reflect on and assess their confidence in a proposed match by exploring potential strengths or areas of risk that they may not have considered and to articulate

'gut feeling' intuitions by exploring a range of strengths and risks. To strengthen decision making when matching children with additional / complex needs this tool might be helpful for Act Qualified professionals to use with prospective adopters to discuss expectations. This tool might also be helpful to support conversations when giving feedback to prospective adoptive families and to assist in developing a shared view and understanding between Act Qualified professionals. Over the matching process, this tool could be used as an indicator of increased confidence in a proposed match as the link progresses. This tool could also be used to mitigate risks by considering a range of potential vulnerabilities and put in place appropriate support and as a final checklist before going to Panel. Future research could explore the usefulness of this tool in practice at different stages and for different purposes in the linking and matching process.

Limitations

Some limitations of the development of the scale should be considered. The scale was developed and tested within a necessarily selective sample, namely, those professionals that consented to take part in the research. The scale was developed with and for the South West Adoption Consortium and it remains to be tested outside of this context. Further research might test the generalizability of the scale in wider regions nationally, as well as internationally. The ability of this matching scale to improve placement stability and to minimize disruptions, might also be tested in future research.

Conclusion

The STrengths And Risks (STAR) adoption matching tool was specifically developed with and for professionals responsible for matching in adoption with good psychometric properties. A systematic and rigorous development process through all stages was conducted in line with psychometric theory of psychological test construction, from item generation using open

interviews, to preliminary test construction to the assessment of the retest reliability and finalization of the tool. Parental perspectives of experiences of disruption revealed a lack of information about the child that some parents felt they lacked about the child at the matching stage (Lyttle et al., 2021). The ability to determine the effectiveness of this tool in minimizing disruptions will be revealed by its use.

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Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview Themes

Theme	%	Example
Adopter's commitment to the long-term needs of the child	83%	"Are they going to be committed, they are going to be caring for the child from 18 and beyond, they may be globally delayed and it is appreciating that they are still going to need help and support beyond that."
Quality of adopter's support network (that they understand and accept the potential challenges of adoption and are able to offer both practical and emotional support) *	83%	"That adopters have a robust support network because what we know about placements that are struggling is that that they become very inward looking and isolated and supporters go away and can't help or don't like what the child is doing and parents become isolated, and that is not healthy."
Quality of support plan / post adoption support for family *	83%	"Services need to be diverse and available throughout the life of the placement."
Adopter's ability to recognize from their own life experience their expectations, triggers and responses	75%	"Someone who is aware of their triggers, are able to manage their feelings if they are triggered and reflect on it afterwards."
Realistic expectations of the unknown challenges, disruptive behavior and potential painful disclosures *	75%	"We have had very few disruptions but one factor that has been common in all has been the level of behavior, difficult and challenging behavior that the adopters were finding themselves faced with was way beyond something they had expected."
Readiness of adopters to priorities the needs of the child over their own emotional or lifestyle needs	75%	"Prepared to change to their current lifestyle."
Adopter's ability to reflect on and achieve some resolution of their own experiences of being parented *	75%	"Their own experiences of being parented. Whether we like it or not our own parenting experience is our default and sometimes people are learning that"
Adopter's capacity to be an advocate on behalf of the child, to work with and challenge professionals and schools, to seek help and access services	67%	"Being able to advocate. If the child has specific needs to be able to stand up and get whatever services that child needs"

Playfulness of the adopter's ability to get on child's level to play, have a sense of humor and have fun	67%	"To be playful, have fun, be a bit stupid and not go straight to boundaries, yes it important to feel safe, but do not prioritize boundaries ahead of having fun and a connection and developing that relationship."
Ability to meet health needs (including physical and mental) of the child	67%	"What the child's needs are, what are the likely health issues."
Ability to meet the emotional and behavioral development needs of the child (especially with respect to attachment and behavior impact resulting from trauma)	67%	"To have an understanding of all the behaviour that you see in your child as a communication of their emotional state, so an understanding of that and responding to the emotion."
Adopter's understanding of the known/unknown and uncertain impact of trauma (i.e., parental substance abuse during pregnancy, experiences of neglect, loss and violence) on child behavior and lifespan development *	58%	"That it is going to be a rough ride, that they really get the child's history and what that might mean for a child, the impact, that they get that."
Participant's confidence that the information regarding the personal history and needs of the child is as detailed, specific and up to date as possible	58%	"Good information, up to date information, accurate information."
Ability to meet familial and social relationship needs of the child	50%	"Open and honest, safe and reliable relationships."
Adopter's capacity for empathy for the feelings a child may have arising from their experiences and losses, however they are expressed	50%	"The capacity to walk in the child's shoes, so a deep sense of empathy, and understanding and being able to see beyond a behaviour."
Adopters present as flexible and open *	42%	"Being able to be flexible and going with what the child needs, not just to start with, but what about when they go back to work."
Consideration of impact of proposed match on existing birth children and adopted children (if relevant) *	42%	When there are birth children, or already an adopted child you have to tread carefully about what will fit into that kind of family. It would depend on the child's needs and that family."
Adopter's resilience and demonstrated ability to face challenges and difficulties.	42%	A lot of it is about resilience of adopters, there can be huge challenges – their strength and resilience individually and as a couple.

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Adopter's acceptance of the child and that their history, however difficult, cannot be changed, and may result in behavioral challenges and developmental delays	33%	"You have to accept where the child is. You can't go back and change it, you have to accept where the child is now and that is very hard because parents really want to go back and rescue the child."
Chemistry felt by the adopter towards the child ('connection to', 'fallen in love with', 'attraction to', 'claiming of' child)	33%	"...observe them from a distance and it can really help them to see if there is initial, some sort of connection."
Quality of the adopter relationship with the child's foster carer (if relevant)	33%	"If the adopters and foster carers get on then we know that the transition is going to go well, we know that later on that they are likely to keep in contact which is massively beneficial for the child."
Adopter ability to meet the needs identified by Adoption Placement Report (APR)	33%	"To meet the criteria in the Adoption Placement Report (APR) to identify strengths and vulnerabilities"].
Adopter's ability to meet the wider social needs of the child (i.e., interests, hobbies)	33%	"Adopters certainly need to find commonality, shared interests - otherwise it's very difficult to look forwards when things are difficult - easier to give up if there's no sense of bond."
Adopter's ability to meet the self-care needs of the child	33%	"We now insist on all adopters getting voluntary experience ideally in a children center or similar. If the adopters don't have this, they can experience shock in reaction to unrealistic expectations in what it takes to care for a child"
Adopter's ability to meet education needs of the child	33%	"To work with professionals and schools, the ability to seek help and access services."
Adopter ability to meet identity needs (ethnicity, religion, culture, language) of the child	33%	"Adopters need to understand difference and be able to promote the child's ethnicity, culture and religion."
Adopter's curiosity, characterized by a non-judgmental stance of wondering and questioning engagement with respect to the child's personal history, presenting needs and behavior	25%	"Wondering about the child's previous experiences, wondering about why they might be behaving in a way, wondering why the parents ended up parenting the child in that way, that is really important."
Adopter's reflection on, and resolution of their reasons for adoption	25%	"That they have come to terms with their reasons for adoption."
Adopter attitudes towards birth family (empathy, not judgemental, openness to contact if no safeguarding issues)	25%	"That they are enquiring about the family and aren't immediately judgmental."

Quality of the proposed introduction plan	25%	"Planning is crucial. Introductions should be on an individual basis."
Preparation of child for introduction	25%	"… to be plonked somewhere where there weren't adequate introductions or transitions."
Alignment in partner motivation to adopt the child (both partners equally committed to the adoption) (if relevant)	25%	"One adopter wanted a child and the other adopter didn't and the adopters have always chosen their partner over the child."
Individual needs are considered with respect to the proposed match (if part of a sibling group)	25%	"Very difficult to look after with competing needs."

Note. * = Items overlap with survey

Table 2. Survey item themes

Survey theme	Average
Adopter's understanding of the known/unknown and uncertain impact of trauma (i.e., parental substance abuse during pregnancy, experiences of neglect, loss and violence) on child behavior and lifespan development *	9.5/10
Adopters present as flexible and open *	9.5/10
Views of the child regarding adoption	9.5/10
Adopter's time to meet the needs of the child	9.4/10
Good communication between all parties involved	9.4/10
Realistic expectations of the unknown challenges, disruptive behavior and potential painful disclosures *	9/10
Quality of support plan / post adoption support for family *	9/10
Foster carer involvement in planning child's introductions and move (if relevant)	9/10
Adopter's ability to reflect on and achieve some resolution of their own experiences of being parented *	8.75/10
Adopters are comfortable with contact plans with birth family	8.7/10
Quality of adopter's support network (that they understand and accept the potential challenges of adoption and are able to offer both practical and emotional support) *	8.6/10
The ability of adopters to offer an experience of secure attachment	8.25/10
Consideration of impact of proposed match on existing birth children and adopted children (if relevant) *	8.2/10
Understanding and consideration of sibling dynamics (rivalry, alliances, exploitation, scapegoating, caregiving, sexualised behaviour) (if relevant)	8.2/10
Adopter preferences are not stretched	7.6/10
Any geographical considerations	5.3/10

Note. * = overlap with interview

Table 3. Components and items of the Strengths and Risks Scale for Adoption

Components and items	Factor loading	Cronbach Alpha
Component 1: "Adopter capabilities and skills." (37.4% of variance; eigenvalue = 23.75)		*α = 0.92*
Adopter's time to meet the needs of the child	0.98	
Ability of adopters to offer an experience of secure attachment	0.98	
Adopter's ability to meet the wider social needs of the child (i.e., interests, hobbies)	0.93	
Adopters present as flexible and open	0.88	
The playfulness of adopter and their ability to get on child's level to play, have a sense of humour and have fun.	0.83	
Adopter's capacity to be an advocate on behalf of the child, to work with and challenge professionals and schools, to seek help and access	0.81	
Adopter's ability to reflect on, and achieve some resolution of their own experiences of being parented.	0.81	
Adopter's ability to meet the familial and social relationship needs of the child	0.8	
Adopter's understanding of the known/unknown and uncertain impact of trauma (i.e., parental substance abuse during pregnancy, experiences of neglect, loss and violence) on child behaviour and lifespan development.	0.79	
Adopter's ability to meet the emotional and behavioural development needs of the child	0.77	
Adopter's ability to recognise from their own life experience their expectations, triggers and responses	0.77	
Realistic expectations of the unknown challenges, disruptive behaviour and potential painful disclosures.	0.77	
Quality of adopter's support network (that they understand and accept the potential challenges of adoption and are able to offer both practical and emotional support)	0.77	
Adopter's resilience and demonstrated ability to face challenges and difficulties.	0.72	
Adopter's ability to meet education needs of the child	0.72	
Alignment in partner motivation to adopt the child (both partners equally committed to the adoption) (If relevant)	0.72	
Adopter's ability to meet the self-care needs of the child	0.68	
Component 2: "Adopter profile and characteristics." (26.47% of variance; eigenvalue = 6.28)		*α = 0.87*
Adopter's reflection on, and resolution of, their reasons for adoption	0.96	
Adopter's commitment to the long-term needs of the child	0.93	

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Understanding and consideration of sibling dynamics (rivalry, alliances, exploitation, scapegoating, caregiving, sexualised	0.92
Adopter's ability to meet the identity (ethnicity, religion, culture) needs of the child	0.87
Adopter's curiosity, characterised by a non-judgemental stance of wondering and questioning regarding child's history and presenting needs and behaviour	0.77
Individual needs are considered with respect to the proposed match (if part of a sibling group) (if relevant)	0.72
Readiness of adopters to priorities the needs of the child over their own emotional or lifestyle needs	0.72
Adopter's capacity for empathy for the feelings a child may have arising from their experiences and losses, however they are	0.79
Adopter attitudes towards birth family (empathy, not judgemental, openness to contact if no safeguarding issues)	0.67
Adopter's preferences are not stretched	0.66

Component 3: "Adoption plans and preparation" (25.31% of variance; eigenvalue = 5.64) — *α = 0.89*

Consideration of impact of proposed match on existing birth children and adopted children (if relevant)	0.99
Preparation of child for introduction	0.93
How confident are you that the information regarding the personal history and needs of the child is as detailed, specific and up to date as	0.92
Adopter comfortable with contact plans with birth family	0.88
Quality of the support plan / post adoption support for family	0.88
Views of the child regarding adoption	0.84
Quality of introduction plan	0.82
Good communication between all parties involved	0.82
Foster carer involvement in planning child's introductions and move (if relevant)	0.75
Chemistry felt by the adopter towards the child ('connection to', 'fallen in love with', 'attraction to', 'claiming of the child').	0.68