



'Most of the agency's clients come with their own history of trauma and child abuse, which has impacted on their ability to parent'

birth mothers has emerged. They meet every other week for an hour and a half. According to Marilyn Kedwards, who runs the group, its first purpose is to confront the isolation that these women experience. The group provides a space to talk about feelings. There is anger, self-hate, despair, sometimes a loss of the will to live, and a sense – where a woman has lost a child because a partner has abused them – that life isn't fair. There are deep trust issues. These women feel they have been abandoned and betrayed many times over, most recently by the system which has taken away their child. And there is competition, jealousy and envy between them; for some will have more rights to contact with their child than others. 'Once this has happened to a woman,' Kedwards points out, 'she can get very stuck in waiting – waiting for the time when her child or children might come and see her.'

With this in mind, the work is about helping the women regain a sense of self, to return to a path where they can envisage life beyond this. It is also to try to help them understand their role in what happened, so that they may be in a better place if they meet their children in the future.

The possibility of change

Transferentially, Kedwards says, this work is tough. As a

counsellor, she may represent the unreliable mother and the punitive system. She holds this in her mind rather than working with it explicitly, because these clients are so wounded and fragile that it can take months to gain enough trust for them to just turn up. Countertransferentially, she says, it can be hard to hold onto empathy and at times she is angry, typically when a client promises to be there and doesn't show. Yet for Kedwards, even the possibility of change makes the work worthwhile. It was a significant success when one woman recently started in paid employment – a model for the rest of the group who are on income support. 'It's really important to make changes in these people's lives,' Kedwards says. 'You can see the patterns that started with their parents' parents in terms of the environment they've grown up in. It's just the hope that even the slightest change will make a difference to them and to their children.'

Working with fathers

This motivation is echoed by Kedwards' colleague, Ian Orr-Campbell who currently works with men whose birth children have been removed. Many of his clients have a history of drug or alcohol misuse, a mental health issue and/or history of sexual abuse. Some have become

abusers themselves. He sees himself as a witness for them when their children have been taken away – a time when they feel shame and anger. 'When something traumatic has happened,' he says, 'there is a wound and shame can lead to drink or drugs. Talking is a way of releasing the pressure for these men. It interrupts a downward spiral.'

His work with the men can involve preparation for a final contact with a child and may involve consideration of what a person wants to say or take with them – a card, a poem or some form of keepsake. Clients can be very conflicted about the meeting and Orr-Campbell likens their processes during the weeks leading up to it to Kübler-Ross's bereavement phases²: the bargaining, denial and then the anger that may be directed towards the self and emerge in addictive behaviours. 'On one level,' he explains, 'most of the parents know that this is about the safety of their child. But it doesn't make it any easier. Those with learning difficulties find it hardest. They forget the visits from social services and the warnings that have gone before. So the final contact is for them the real ending.'

According to Orr-Campbell, many of his male clients respond well to an upfront and challenging approach. It's important, he says, to have the courage not

to back off, but it's also crucial to show and to model male sensitivity and tenderness. His sessions are often flexible. A meeting may be a walk in the park or a talk on the phone, where someone does not feel able to be seen, perhaps around a painful date like an anniversary. Dates are important. He is currently working with one client still wrestling with what happened when his children were removed and adopted 20 years ago.

'They feel that their old friends judge and reject them,' concludes Kedwards. 'Who do they talk to about what's happened? They can feel silenced. The grandparents have also lost grandchildren. And it can be very painful for them to associate with other people who still have children.' Personally, I had always thought that losing a child to death was the worst thing that could happen to someone. But now I feel that this is pretty close to that.'

References

1. Booth P, Jernberg A. *Theraplay: helping parents and children build better relationships through attachment based play*. British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF); 1998.
2. Kübler-Ross E. *On death and dying*. London: Tavistock. 1970