

Fractured Blame

By Lottie Stones

Breakages. They happen, some more frequently than others. After quick consideration of how the breaks happened, the main focus turns to who can fix it, or how can it be fixed.

When it comes to families in crisis seeking support from services, questions are not asked about how or what can be put in place to help and support. No, questions focus, and remain squarely focused, on who broke it or who is to blame.

So, if I were to consider why my gate is broken, I could spend time thinking it was caused by the storm, or the kids kicking the ball, or it was faulty, or it wasn't put together properly so it's the handyman's fault. Did that blame game/fault-finding exercise achieve anything?

No.

There are too many parents being blamed by services, especially when complex issues are ignored, and there is a failing to acknowledge the real factors contributing to the situation. Is blame there to distract from shortcomings, to alleviate responsibility, to avoid the real issue? Whichever it is, it needs to stop. Parental Blame only serves to perpetuate stigma and shame, hindering any progress. Isn't it also a human rights violation? It is oppressive, it is avoiding reality, and it is counterproductive.

Blaming others or external circumstances doesn't solve the problem. It fails to address the problem, it perpetuates the conflict, builds stigma, and breeds injustice.

A worry is that in these LA's/RAA's there is a power imbalance, and an influence of those with titles. Even those within the system face bias and blame, it feels like a powerful undercurrent, but it is a toxic storm cloud. If something isn't right someone has to pay. There are many who are shown the door and shamed through it. Blamed for an act they probably were not entirely responsible for. That's not to say the individual won't have made mistakes, but there is always a different reality, which is easy to ignore when in the realms of a busy industry, where workers are hypersensitive to criticism and blame.

The reality is blame kills accountability and avoids responsibility by scapegoating. Toxic blame is born out of power and influence, and it can be a way of exerting control or deflecting responsibility and self-preservation.

Blame is never the answer.

Blame In Adoption Crisis

If the toxic blame culture is part of the organisational institutions we are asking for help and support from, it is no surprise we face such treatment. Victim blaming ensures any accountability is avoided.

Bias and blame often go hand in hand. Bias can lead to unfair judgments and assumptions, while blame assigns responsibility. Bias and blame can hinder empathy, understanding, and effective problem-solving.

Blame appears to serve a purpose, it assigns responsibility, it scapegoats, and deflects attention from the deeper issues, it's a toll for those in power to manipulate others.

Blame is the easier option, but it does not lead to solution, resolution or improvement. It actually exacerbates problems by creating resentment, defensiveness, and further conflict.

Fundamental Attribution Bias

Let's attribute the issues to the more observable, simplistic viewpoint, and ignore all the other factors and circumstances.

- You are struggling with your adopted child because you are a harmful parent.
- You cannot manage the challenges of parenting because you shouldn't have been a parent.
- You are unable to cope with your child's behaviour because you aren't implementing the right parenting strategies.
- Your child is struggling with their behaviour because you aren't a good enough parent.
- Your child is demonstrating tricky and harmful behaviour and we will find you at fault.

Because of you!

Read the following document to evidence this

<https://www.ourpatch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-Jarring-Reality-of-Adoption.pdf>

That is not to state that as adopters we haven't made mistakes, or that we haven't got things wrong, and each situation is different. But isn't that just parenting.

Blame is used in this incidence because there is a gap. A gap in process, policy, pathways, understanding and knowledge base. So blame is the easy response, it's single layers, it's stonewalling, and it's an embedded defence, which cannot change without action.

www.ourpatch.org.uk

But I am to blame!

I do blame me. Totally and utterly, but that is because I am generally pre-determined toward self-negative bias. However, I also know that I am not to blame, and actually nobody would go through what my kids went through and come out the other side emotionally, psychologically and physical unscathed.

I campaign to stop my own my own self-negative bias, because in the light of campaigning I can reason and see sense, and maybe eventually I won't feel I have failed my children. Campaigning to stop blame isn't the goal, this goal is to lift blame away so the focus becomes the child.

Blame destroys accountability, reflection, learning and change. It is defensive, a problem, a fight, and it is powerful. Blame sabotages problem solving, and therefore sabotages the chance of real support.

The solution not the problem

It's essential to move beyond blame as this sabotages too much potential for managing the problem more effectively. What is needed is reflective leadership that considers the factors being dismissed and avoided when blame is the tool of choice.

This means that those behind the blame narrative need to –

Listen

- Trauma cannot be ignored, needs to be confronted, and considered for all children needing safe options for permanence.
- Children need help recovering from their trauma, otherwise they face certain turmoil.
- Failing children, failing adopters is a cost that cannot be ignored.
- Children are not going back into the care system for free.
- Trauma is a societal issue which costs everyone.
- Adopters in crisis are not protesting silently and will not be suppressed.
- Blaming adopters is a miscarriage of justice.
- Adopters are the experts on our children, on our lives.

Be open to discussion.

A discussion/conversation is needed to really increase the depth of understanding. There is such a diversity of opinions, values, perspectives and narratives. The discussions/conversations need to be held with an open mind and a willingness to exchange opinions and ideas to ensure progress. There needs to be a cultivation of value and an openness to find the truth in this matter.

The experts living in adoption, the experts in trauma, the experts in policy making, and beyond need to be in that discussion.

Reflect

We can't go back and make a changes in the past, or argue over what happened, it is a battle nobody can win, it takes time, it takes energy and it isn't helpful.

Reflection can have no ego, and there needs to be a step away from destructive power imbalances. Whilst there may be fear and resistance of making mistakes, there needs to be an untangling of the current to make the new.

This enables awareness of areas of strength, but can also, constructively, raise awareness of bias, failings and pitfalls, and can help gain insights on how to adapt current processes to fit the need.

Acknowledge and recognise change is needed.

It's not about perfection or resolution, it's about recognition and the importance of ethical practise making a positive impact, and continuing along a pathway to progress.

Learn

When starting on this journey of becoming an adopter I was confident, (not cocky) that I would be a good parent, that I could manage and that I had a good understanding of the difficulties I may face on my journey of being a mum.

Well, I couldn't have been more disillusioned. I am a good parent but there was a chunk missing in my understand, knowledge and skills that no matter how good the prep, the assessment I could never have got.

Trauma was of course a word I knew, I had worked in a drug/alcohol rehab, a prison and in a children's home; I had done a degree.....

I had never learnt what I know now. That the impact of trauma on a child is like a wrecking ball on a building.

I learnt it through living with it. I learnt through fearing it, feeling it and breathing it.

Trauma needs more time than its been given. Time spent on a degree course, time as an AYSE, time as a newly qualified, as a director or a head of service. If time isn't given to trauma, then a big piece of the jigsaw of the world got blown away.

The thing is if I invented the world, social workers wouldn't be the ones determining the policy, process or the pathway. It would be psychologists leading, guiding, teaching, directing, and care planning. Social worker intervening within crisis due to trauma is a plane being piloted by a train driver.

Plan/ train/ implement change!

This is an opportunity to make a positive impact in the world of adoption, creating a new way of managing adoption crisis, with accountability and ethics at the face of it.

Problem solving is tricky within adoption crisis, as there is no simple solution or resolution.

The root cause is abuse. The issue is trauma. Its not simple.

Right person, right time, right support.

Who is the expert?

Are the experts the psychologist, the therapists, the social workers, the adopters, the adoptees?

Maybe it's all of them, maybe within a reflective learning exercise there needs to be consideration of wide lenses considering different views, experiences and values.

But we need the science too. We need to understand the story, the journey, the impact and the options of helping everyone involved.

There needs to be focus on the child and the parent. The impact of parenting a child who has been through trauma is traumatic, and we need to be open to that, and we need to talk that, not be shamed for it.

The Wrong Seat

- Since joining this campaign I have felt that we are seen to be in the wrong seat to complain. Why did you adopt? Surely you knew it would be hard.
- You have chosen to do this so how dare you say the support isn't good enough.
- You have signed up for this.

Well, I am not in the wrong seat, but I am in a unique seat!

And yes, I bloody will ask for better, even if I cannot manage, because the support isn't good enough. And I adopted because I wanted to be a mum, and no matter what, I am.

The problem isn't the social workers, or the adopters, or the support workers or the policy makers or the rest.

It's the people who allow bias and blame and are so blind to it they do not see it. Those in power who use it to assign responsibility, so much so that it becomes a learnt behaviour, a protective stance. It's there to deflect attention away systemic failures, or to avoid addressing broader procedural issues. Blame and bias is a power tool, to control

and manipulate, which sadly is ingrained and a default position when there is little else to answer to the issues.

So many professionals have opted to listen, have been open to discussion and reflection, have acknowledged the issues, and welcomed/been open to the possibility of change. I hope each month brings more and more, so we can cultivate and grow this need.

Navigating without a map, orienteering without a compass. Is blamed and bias in place as there is no process, no policy, no standard practice for adoption crisis.

Has anyone got the power, to ask the question? I have tried to ask but have no power, and those I have approached have backed away, or come at me with anger to ensure that there is no reflection or disparaging commentary on social care, to ensure that their Council cannot fall into disrepute.

There is the weakness right there, ego and hyper-sensitivity to block any sense of reflection at the top, and a propensity towards toxic blame.

Not once has an LA responded, asked to know more or even shown an interest. That speaks volumes.