

# Adoption and fostering: Matching religion and ethnicity makes for happier families

October 18 2019, by Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There are around [75,000](#) children in England who live in care—73% of these children will be fostered and for 3% of these children adoption will be their route to a loving, safe and permanent home.

I adopted my [children](#), and they have filled my life with joy. I am

witness to the rewards of adoption. But although the number of children in care in England is consistently increasing, [the number of adoptions has fallen](#), and recent statistics show that twice as many children are [waiting to be adopted as families to adopt](#). There is also a [national shortage of foster carers](#).

My experiences as an adoptive mother and a sociologist of Islam has led me to explore the experiences of Muslim children in care. The government does not record the religion of children in care but our research shows that [around 4,500](#) of the children in the care system in Britain are Muslim.

Children of Muslim heritage are likely to experience significant delays in finding a long-term fostering or adoptive placement. Where a child has complex needs—due to health, disability, age, mixed or multiple heritage background or being part of a sibling group—finding a permanent placement takes even longer. And for some Muslim children, finding a permanent home may never happen. This is mainly due to the fact that there are significantly [fewer black and minority ethnic adopters and foster carers](#).

## A 'perfect' match

The government has tried to reduce delays through new policies that emphasize [transracial placements](#). But transracial placements are [criticized by many social work experts](#). And despite changes to the law, when finding families, [social workers](#) still try to find "perfect" or "near perfect" matches for children—by prioritizing ethnic matching.

Social workers believe matching children with ethnically similar families is best practice for both the child and the adopters. This maintains the children's biological heritage but also, as documented in [our research](#) with [CoramBAAF](#), the adoption and fostering academy, shows most

adopters want their children to "look like them" so that the children are "comfortable" and so "they do not stand out as a family."

That is not to say children from a religious background can't thrive in any loving family. Of paramount importance is children's need for security, love, comfort and permanence. All children and their circumstances are different. Indeed, as shown in [our research](#), for some children it may not be appropriate to place them in same-religion households. But for many other children, matching their faith and ethnic needs makes it more likely that they will attach better and sooner to their carers.

## **Religious identity**

When children come into care, they experience upheaval, displacement and trauma -- and their faith is something familiar to hold onto. As one British Pakistani female care leaver told us: "When I couldn't understand what was happening in my life ... why I was separated from my parents and brothers, when I was sad, I knew I had Allah and that he has a plan for me."

For Muslim children, faith can play an important role in their identity. And many [Muslim adopters and foster carers](#) see faith as central to their identities—which means they may be best-placed to meet the needs of children who come from ethnic and religious backgrounds similar to their own.

For many Muslim adopters and foster carers, this faith also motivates them to adopt in the first place. Indeed, many Muslims will know that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was an orphan who was fostered by his grandfather and then by his uncle. And that he fostered his nephew. But while such stories and [an insistence in the Quran](#) on caring for vulnerable children does encourage some Muslim couples to come

forward to adopt, there are still not enough Muslim placements to match the demand.

Delays in the adoption system cause [lasting harm](#) for vulnerable children, and may rob them of their best chance of the love and stability of a new family. Indeed, Dr. Julie Selwyn, professor of education and adoption, has [said that](#): "Delay in decision making and action has an unacceptable price in terms of the reduction in children's life chances and the financial costs to local authorities, the emotional and financial burden later placed on adoptive families and future costs to society."

So rather than emphasize transracial placements, more needs to be done by the government and local authorities to recruit more diverse adopters and foster carers—including Muslims. And this must be done in culturally informed ways, that recognize diverse cultural motivations and theological debates.

And for Muslim children in care, by understanding the importance of religion in their lives and in their prospective Muslim adopters or foster carers, it will help to assist in the formation, evolution and preservation of their identities.

Our report also emphasizes existing good practice in how social workers strive to meet the needs and aspirations of all children in care, including Muslims. But it is clear there must be greater joined-up thinking and collective action from all involved in adoption to prioritize each child's welfare, security and happiness—and this includes recognizing the value of religious identity to a child's life and well-being.

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