

Report on Danú, a Birth Parent Support group for women who have placed a child for adoption:

01/02/2023

Author: Sheila Gallagher, Social Worker

Background to the group

In 2005, as a social worker who was providing an Information and Tracing Service at St Attracta's Adoption Society, I initiated the idea of providing a group for mothers who had placed a child for adoption. My experience of meeting mothers who contacted the adoption service to seek information or to trace their son or daughter was that they were still grieving the loss of their child many years after the adoption.

History of the group

The women that presented to the adoption service expressed the same feelings of loss, sadness, guilt, and shame and had rarely talked to anyone about their experience or the fact that they had had a child. The group began as an attempt to respond to the needs of this group of women. Research was undertaken in relation to what already existed nationally and what types of support benefitted women who had placed a child for adoption.

The group began in 2005 and was facilitated and developed by Elizabeth King, Manager the Sligo Family Resource Centre, Seamus O' Gallchoir, St Mura's Adoption Society, Aisling Ryan, Social Worker, Adoption Services Mayo and myself, Sheila Gallagher, then St Attracta's Adoption Society and since 2016, a social worker with Tusla. In 2014 Carmel Mc Namee, group facilitator was invited to co facilitate the group. The group has been based at the Sligo Family Resource Centre, 49 The Mall, Sligo. This provides a neutral and very welcoming space for the group meetings

Research on loss recognises the important role of social support for those who have suffered bereavements. For most of the mother's, this is the first time that the loss of their child was acknowledged and recognised. Grief which is hidden and where there is little or no public acknowledgement has been described as 'disenfranchised grief' (Doka, 2002), i.e a hidden grief. 'Motherhood Silenced' by Ruth Kelly, clearly documents the silence that women experienced following the child's placement in adoption.

For this group of women being able to connect socially with others who have experienced similar hidden losses has helped. The group from the outset was facilitated by an experienced professional and this has contributed to creating a confidential and safe place for these women to talk about their experiences.

Main events in the group's history

During the past years the group has focused on encouraging the women to take good self-care. Workshops have been offered and these have included yoga, writing, and art.

Members of the group have attended workshops on bereavement, been involved in training events for adoptive parents and have met with members of the Donegal birth parent support group from St Mura's Adoption Society.

In 2014 the Danu Birth Parent Support Group website was developed. Information about the group, its aims and objectives are listed as well as the Information Booklet.

In 2015 group facilitation skills training was offered to group members

In 2016 a woman from the group represented the group at national and local meetings of the Adoption Authority. She has offered her experience to Tusla in relation to publicity around the proposed legislation on Information and Tracing and has provided interviews to newspapers and radio on adoption related matters.

In 2016 an information booklet for birth mothers was devised in conjunction with the group. This was launched at a Public meeting in Sligo City Hall in September 2016. Three of the women talked at the Launch about their experiences of adoption and the importance of the group. This Information leaflet is used widely across all national adoption services. The information booklet is available on both the Irish Association of Social Workers website and the Adoption Authority. : Since the launch of its information booklet in September 2016 the group has begun to have a national profile. 2,000 copies of the booklet were published. (See website for this Information Booklet: <http://birthmothersgroup.com/>).

In 2018 one of the women in the group contributed to a book on written by Evelyn Robinson, author of 'Adoption and Loss'.

In 2022 we were extremely proud and honoured to attend the launch of a book written by Eithne Ring, a member of Danú, who wrote a book called 'Does *my son take Sugar?*. It's a honest and wise memoir about the story of her son's adoption. The book also includes an account from the birth father and his experience as well. (<https://eithnering.wordpress.com/>)

In 2022 the group met four times and used a Hotel venue close to Sligo. We plan a further four meetings in 2023. In our first group of 2023, 10 women attended with six apologies.

Group Practice and philosophy

The purpose of the group is to provide a safe, confidential place for birth mothers to seek support and to talk about their experience of adoption. It is extremely difficult for many women to come forward and speak about their experience of placing a baby for adoption because of the very secretive nature of past adoption practices. Losing a child to adoption is not something that most birth mothers can talk about easily, until they themselves receive

support and understanding. Members of the group speak about how being part of the group reduces their sense of isolation and sadness and understand the importance of this group to their sense of well-being. *"In this group I know I am totally understood"*.

Women's participation and attendance is very individual, enabling different members to come along when they are in need of support with specific developments; to engage for a period of time while dealing with a particular concern or issue; or to attend regularly and receive ongoing support and interaction. The group is designed to be as comfortable and welcoming a space for new members attending for the first time as for members involved since its inception. To ensure this degree of flexibility and consistency it is essential to have two facilitators working with members.

Being in a group sometimes seems too difficult and too intense for women who have not spoken about their experience to anyone before and many women find it very challenging to open up and begin to talk about their past. In these situations, women are offered the opportunity to meet with other birth mothers for two-to-one or one-to-one support and encouraged to seek additional support such as counselling.

Referrals to the group

Referrals to the group come from a combination of women self-referring or through a social worker or family member. Before coming to the group, women have the opportunity to talk and or meet with the group facilitators: Sheila Gallagher, Carmel Mc Namee, or Elizabeth King and if possible, another group member. Members are asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. There is a clause in this agreement which states that members can come to the group for as long as they feel it is helpful to them. This is an important issue in that the women themselves decide how long their attendance is helpful.

The group had its first meeting in 2005 and fifteen women attended this first gathering. Since 2005 over forty women have been part of and availed of the group support. The group meets on average five times a year usually on a Wednesday evening at the Sligo Family Resource Centre. Attendance at meetings can vary but the average attendance is 9 to 10. There is a core group of 6 women who have been with the group for the last 18 years. Women travel great distances to attend the group and women have come from Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Roscommon, Cavan, Clare, Galway and Tyrone. In February 2023 Barnardos are arranging a once off group meeting for mothers which will be hosted in Co Galway.

Some women are not ready to attend a meeting and the group members are very open and offer phone support to those who would like some support. In the past few years, we have had phone enquiries from women based in other areas of the country and phone support has been offered by the women and the social worker. Most of these enquiries were known to the Tusla adoption services.

We have a close working relationship Barnardos who facilitates a six week based course for birth mothers. In November 2022 Danú facilitators and a woman from the group met with two Barnardo's staff to further develop this contact.

Notice of meetings is made by email and by text messages. Currently we have women on our email list who are birth mothers who have had contact with the adoption service in Sligo and are based in Northern Ireland and Canada. Email contact is also used to share information about the group as well as relevant information about adoption issues.

What is most valued by the group members is the space and the connections that the group offers for them to gather and to be able to talk safely about their son's or daughters at whatever stage their search or contact is at.

How to contact the group

Referrals to the group can be made by contacting myself at :

Sheila Gallagher, Social Worker, 2 Custom House Quay, Sligo 087 153 3491 and Sheila.gallagher2@tusla.ie

Elizabeth King, Manager, Sligo Family Resource Centre, 49 The Mall, Sligo phone 071 91 46315 and 0879143646

Carmel Mc Namee, Group Facilitator, through the above address

We welcome discussion, comment and feedback on the above.

February 2023

References

Doka, K, J. (2002), Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice, Research Press

Information Booklet: <http://birthmothersgroup.com/>.

Ring, E, ' Does my son take sugar?', 2022 <https://eithnering.wordpress.com/>

Robinson, E, Adoption and Loss, Clova publication, 2018 :<https://clovapublications.com/>

Kelly,Ruth, Motherhood Silenced, 2005

Appendix

Here is a sample of some of the themes that have arisen in part of the group's discussions

Ongoing relationship, our families and telling the story: All of the themes and discussions in the group are about where the women are in terms of their lives and their relationships with the children they have placed for adoption as well as their other close family relationships. The themes and issues that have emerged is a reminder of how adoption is lifelong and is intergenerational

Some of the themes were about the ongoing relationships for the mothers with their adult children. Some women are at the early stages of connections, others are much further down this road. Some reported that after the initial intensity the slowing down of contact can be felt more severely because of the loss in the past. Even after many years have passed and where the relationship is ongoing where a mother adapts to her adult son or daughters life can still be uncertain and unclear. Other women have stronger relationships and they are on a much more even keel. This was recently evidenced by the adopted adult confirming directly the importance of the birth mother in their lives.

Issues in relation to wider family members

Some women still struggle with their wider family relationships. When a mother's siblings are aware of their son or daughter the reactions can vary from being positive to being neutral and seeming not to be interested. Family members can struggle to know whether to enquire or what to say. When a woman gets more confidence in herself she can have a sense of liberty in being able to state more clearly what support they need from those close to them.

Women recognise that when their adult children come back in to our lives it can shift the dynamic of the family relationships this can be true for their siblings and also for the children that they reared. The fact that a child was placed for adoption outside of the family circle can have an impact on the every day and special events that take place in our families.

Some women can now take more ownership and are able to answer the truth about the very simple question of ' how many children do you have? Some have been able to say 'it's a long story, I will tell you some other time'. Not having to deny your child is a very powerful place to arrive to.

In the Early Days and grief :

Mothers discover that the early days are hardest after the first contact because in these early days mothers grieve all the years they had not grieved before. Grief can get buried in our ongoing lives. The pregnancy and decisions surrounding that changed our lives and our way of being in the world.

Hearing stories about adoption and Tuam in the last year

The impact of news about adoption, baby deaths and the Tuam mother and baby homes has awakened feelings of grief, anger and loss again for both those affected by it as well as having to reflect on one's own experience of disempowerment. Tuam is a time to acknowledge the loss, the past and the fact that we are not to blame for how others treated us as pregnant and single. The punitive nature of our families towards us was communicated by words and actions

Some of the questions that have arisen are :

- How do we involve birth fathers / our partners or husbands and where can they get support
- How does the adopted person become more connected with his/ her wider extended family to give them the sense of belonging?

What helps and supports us

The messages from the group are of hope and acceptance.

Members are accepted for what we are, we can share our stories without being judged and the women can stop judging themselves.

The group provides reassurance, members can tell one another that things will get better, that these raw feelings of now will alter and one can be in a better place.

Members can be strong together and seek support. The group provides strength in numbers. We gain strength in being able to speak together.

Hearing from others about what they have been through on their search gives the other perspective and strength

Members know that they are not alone anymore.

The power of being heard, being able to share, a laugh, cake and finding out what things one needs to do to make things 'ok'. This can include humour, walking, talking and writing.

One group member shared how finding a forest walk fits with how one is in the world walking through the trees noticing the, shadow, darkness and then light. How the tops of the trees have to struggle for light and then they reach the light.

Evaluation of group:

In 2007 I undertook an evaluation of the women's experience of being part of the group. The evaluation found that the benefits of the group had decreased the women's sense of isolation. They were unanimously positive about being part of this group. One woman said that she no longer considered herself as a 'bad person' for making the decision that she had made for her child. The women described the negative impact on close relationships including their own mothers, partners and children.

The experience of being part of the group meant that these mothers no longer felt alone with their loss. The women felt that they were able to talk without the fear of being judged. It also helped them to make sense of their experience of adoption, it provided opportunities for the first time to talk about their feelings of anger, shame and sense of powerlessness. The group provided a place where they began to feel a greater self-confidence.

The experience of facilitating and being part of the group remains a lesson on the importance of hearing from those who have been directly impacted by adoption. (Gallagher, S, 2007, unpublished Evaluation of the Birth parent support group).