*Ben Gurney-Smith is a Consultant Chartered Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Lead for the Therapy Service at Adoptionplus. Ben has considerable experience with children who have experienced maltreatment in their birth families and who are now fostered or adopted. He was involved in the establishment of a nationally regarded, dedicated and specialist local authority service in Oxford, and has a long standing research interest in how children and their families recover from traumatic beginnings. He has been a Visiting Tutor at the Oxford Institute of Clinical Psychology Training course in the area of safeguarding, attachment and work with adoptive families, worked as an expert witness in care proceedings, and is on the Board of Directors of the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy Institute to see the promotion and evaluation of this promising therapeutic approach.*

**Practice innovation area: Bringing mindfulness to adoption**

1. Please introduce yourself: who are you, where do you work and what are your research interests?

Hello, my name is Dr Ben Gurney-Smith and I am a Chartered Consultant Clinical Psychologist.  I am currently the Clinical Lead at Adoptionplus, which is a Voluntary Adoption Agency based just outside Milton Keynes.  I have a long interest in understanding the parenting task of looked after and adopted children and have investigated the role of parenting stress as a marker of some of the unique difficulties involved as well as the potential ways it can be alleviated.  The particular research I am going to talk about here was supported by the organisation and written with my colleagues at Adoptionplus, Patricia Downing, Becca McMillin and Katherine Kidd and describes how we developed and evaluated a mindfulness service for adoptive parents.

2. Why did you conduct this particular study?

The paper is rather more modest than a study *per se*; it principally charts the development of a new service for adoptive parents using mindfulness.  Along the way we provide some early outcome data to support its rationale.  The paper was written to share these promising findings and to highlight how research had built up to provide a justification for using Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy to address parenting stress in adoption.  Developing new services is important and we hope the paper gives some insights in how we went about this which may be of help to others.  Some of the foundational research was conducted by me and my colleagues in a couple of studies investigating the links with parenting stress, attachment difficulties and mindfulness; my view was that it could justify the next step to develop a new service for adoptive parents.

We were also aware from the literature that adoptive parents were often offered help to *think* differently but this often meant little change in how stressed they felt. We wondered if being taught mindfulness, which has a good evidence base elsewhere already, might help parents not only *feel* differently by bringing their stress down but that they might have a greater chance of being more `mindful' as a parent, in other words less defensive and judgmental towards themselves and their children which is so important in parenting children with attachment difficulties. The service we described in the paper seemed to `plug the gap' in adoption services and so that's why we settled on part of the title for the paper as `Minding the Gap'.

3. What did you find?

It was pleasing to see that we found that there were promising, positive benefits to using mindfulness to address parenting stress. Also the mindfulness programme did not need any modification and so could be delivered `off the shelf' by a qualified practitioner with good results. We also found we had good results whenever it was offered to parents including providing it to our adopters before any children were placed. Indeed we have come to conclude that mindfulness is a potentially deeply preparative tool to prospective adopters who have not parented before because it better matches the nature of the parenting task.

4. What have you learnt from this and what do we still not know?

First of all, we think an evaluation with all the appropriate controls and longer term follow ups would be necessary to deepen confidence in using mindfulness in adoption. However we are learning that the role of mindfulness in parenting may not only reduce stress but it offers a potential way to get back to feeling the necessary qualities of empathy, compassion and attunement that may be lost in the moment and over time when attachment difficulties persist. Whilst we know those are important qualities in parenting of any kind, the concern has been where these disappear for adoptive parents because of the specific difficulties they encounter in children with attachment difficulties. We would like to know more from adoptive parents and perhaps a qualitative study would be helpful so we can better understand the mechanism of any change in their parenting and for that matter, the child. Mindfulness for adoption is now becoming more widely available and it's been a really good learning experience to link up with new services nationally who are offering this.

5. What are the implications of your findings for VAA practice?

his paper helps give some method to developing new interventions within a VAA which embodies a research and development approach. It may simply be helpful for practitioners to know that there is a cost effective intervention which targets some of the unique difficulties in adoptive parenting quickly and with, at this stage, an emerging evidence base.

6. Where can people find out more?

You can find out more about the service at Adoptionplus by following: http://www.adoptionplus.co.uk/

You can read the paper: Gurney-Smith, B., Downing, P., Kidd, K., & McMillin, R. (2017). 'Minding the gap': developing mindfulness for adoption. *Adoption & Fostering*, *41*(2), 110-119.

There is more about mindfulness from the Oxford Mindfulness Centre: http://oxfordmindfulness.org/

I welcome some interest by email at: ben.gurneysmith@adoptionplus.co.uk