

Bradley

Part One

Bradley is one of six. He has two older sisters, two younger brothers and a baby sister. His mother, Pat, has cared for them as a single parent. Bradley is Black British: his father's family originate from Barbados, his mother's in the Irish travelling community.

Bradley's first contact with social workers was when he was just three months old and the next three years saw the family involved with services from time to time. Several different problems were presented. Bradley's sisters both attended school infrequently; the family were made homeless repeatedly because of rent arrears; the children all suffered a very serious infestation of nits. Interagency checks revealed that the family were notorious for missing appointments. The whole family lived for a while with Bradley's maternal grandmother but moved out again soon after his step-grandfather punished the oldest girl with a severe beating. The move was supported by the local authority with a deposit for a privately rented flat.

When he was 3 years and 9 months, the police implemented a police protection order. This arose because police were called by shop-keepers who witnessed Pat in acute distress, having tried to use a credit card that refused payment, running without care into traffic and holding her youngest child, who was naked, very roughly in her arms. The police found Bradley and his brothers at home alone and eventually tracked down the older girls still playing out in the street much later that night. The police protection order was in place for only a few hours because a maternal aunt was persuaded to move in with the family and help.

A legal planning meeting was held following this incident, and ten days later, at the age of three years and 9 months, Bradley and all his siblings were made the subject of a Child Protection Plan. At this point, his birth father withdrew from the situation and all contact stopped

A parenting assessment was initiated as part of the Child Protection Plan. It was quickly apparent that Pat was barely coping with her children's needs and demands. She described feeling overwhelmed by the struggle to head a home and family on such a low income and by the number of times they had been forced to move home. She spent much of the time with her assessors in uncontrollable tears. Specialist assessment indicated that her IQ fell into the lower end of the range for borderline learning disability. She was assessed as suffering from clinical depression and acute anxiety, with frequent panic attacks. During this time, Pat was hospitalised by several unexplained seizures. It became clear that the relationship between Bradley's mother and grandmother was fraught. Pat often sought and sometimes received very active support from her mother, but at other times fierce arguments would erupt, often followed by several months of estrangement.

Assessment highlighted multiple difficulties but Bradley's family stayed together, and all five children were continuously subject to a Child Protection Plan. During the following years, they continued to struggle financially and lived at several temporary addresses. Various support packages were designed and put in place using both

family centres and social work assistants. It was suggested that Pat's seizures were non-epileptic, probably associated with stress. Over time, it was also evident that she had very little capacity to follow parenting advice or make effective use of the practical support available to her.

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Part Two

Soon after Bradley's seventh birthday, Pat took a near fatal overdose while he was at home with her. Over the next few months she suffered a series of prolonged black-outs in quick succession. Struggling already to care for the five children, these episodes undermined what little confidence she had. Bradley and his siblings were all taken into care under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. By this time his attendance at school was very poor; he was unable to keep up with his peers and needed a lot of additional support in the classroom.

The local authority placed Bradley and the other two boys with Hazel, the youngest one's paternal aunt. It was made clear to Pat that they would issue care proceedings should she try to remove the boys from their new home. A kinship assessment was undertaken and Bradley's progress monitored. Bradley regularly wet the bed, his attendance at school remained rather poor. The school described Bradley as much cleaner and less hungry than in the past, albeit a bit quiet and shy.

By the time Bradley was eight, Hazel applied for a residence order and was supported in this by the local authority. While these proceedings were in progress, she went away on a planned trip to Barbados with her partner and the boys were placed in temporary foster care. Bradley talked openly to the foster carers about being physically punished for bedwetting by Hazel's partner and it emerged that the whole family lived in a climate of fear because of him. The boys returned to Hazel's care subject to a written agreement that excluded her partner from the home. However, it soon became clear that although he had another home now, this controlling man was still a central figure in the family. In the meanwhile, Bradley's mother was diagnosed with an epileptic disorder and seizures remitted with treatment. Consequently, a Special Guardianship Order was declined and further assessment of Bradley's mother was ordered, the three boys all staying on with Hazel on an interim residence order in the meanwhile.

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Part Three

While parenting assessment was underway, Hazel soon decided that she could no longer look after the boys, because of hostility from Pat's family who lived nearby. The parenting assessment indicated that Pat could be expected to provide a good enough level of care for her youngest children so all three boys returned home subject to a residence order by the time Bradley went into Year 9. There were still several concerns: Bradley sometimes soiled or wet himself at school, all three boys seemed unusually quiet, and were sometimes very obviously hungry. School staff found Pat unhelpful and uncooperative, support staff who remembered her from before noticed that she seemed to be slipping back into depression.

One year on Pat became overwhelmed with anxiety, extreme panic and made an almost successful suicide attempt. For a further two years, various social work interventions were made in response to new difficulties as they arose. Pat said that she was unable to control Bradley sometimes. She became pregnant again three times, miscarried two babies and eventually gave birth prematurely to a much-wanted daughter. Her partner was arrested for serious drug offences and faced deportation. Housing problems and rows between Pat and her mother persisted.

Bradley's transition to secondary school did not go well. He was repeatedly reported as a bully, stole from his peers and was often found at the centre of any trouble in his year group. Bradley was excluded at the beginning of Year 8 because of plausible allegations that he sexually assaulted a girl in the year below. Pat showed her GP injuries that she said she was unable to explain because it was "too difficult to talk about".

Three months after his exclusion from school Bradley came back into care, again under Section 20 of the Children Act, 1989, when Pat was arrested for neglect of her baby daughter. Bradley and his brothers were placed with foster carers and an Interim Care Order was made the following month. Bradley's first placement broke down when Bradley hit another, slightly older boy in placement. A second placement disrupted very swiftly because Bradley set out to bully the foster carer's daughters.

At fourteen, Bradley is now subject to a Care Order and has lived in a children's home for the last three months. He sometimes initiates unplanned contact with Pat and usually has cigarettes, a bottle of vodka or unaccounted for extra cash, after these visits back home. His brothers are still in foster care but Bradley expresses no interest in spending time with them.