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Creating a Family Life for a Child through Adoption

ACWA Conference 2018

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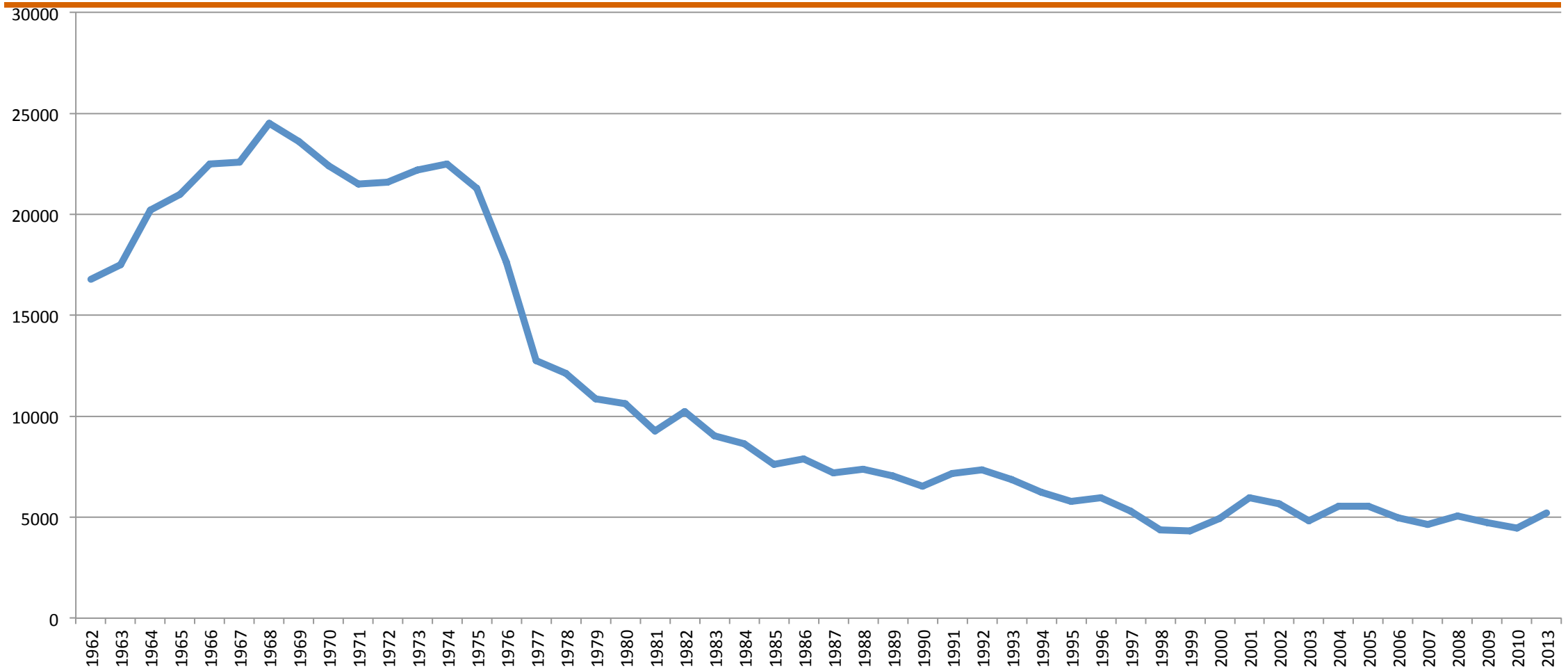
The Challenge in the U.K.

- Does adoption have an ethical and human rights framework? *BASW Report*
- Is it considered as the gold standard placement for vulnerable children?
- Are local authorities driven by government targets to remove and place children for adoption? *Louise Tickle Guardian*
- What is causing the year on year rise in care proceedings? *Care Crisis Review*
- Is adoption a response to increasing levels of poverty, social adversity and austerity resulting from harsh and irresponsible government policy?

Parenting in Adoption

- Love is All'
- 'Secrecy' – 'Start Again'
- Could adoption work for 'high risk groups?
  - Disabled children
  - Children from black and minority ethnic communities
  - Abused children
  - Older Children
  - Sibling Groups

Total Adoptions



In the adoptees I have studied, their development and relationships to the adoptive mothers were clinically indistinguishable from blood kin children up to the time they were told of their adoption. After the disclosure, the children's behaviour, thought contents and relationships showed dramatic changes… a toddler doesn't need to know he is adopted, he needs to know he belongs.

(Weider 1978)

Adoption…'the knowledge will hurt them.

Maintain the secret. Tell older siblings that -

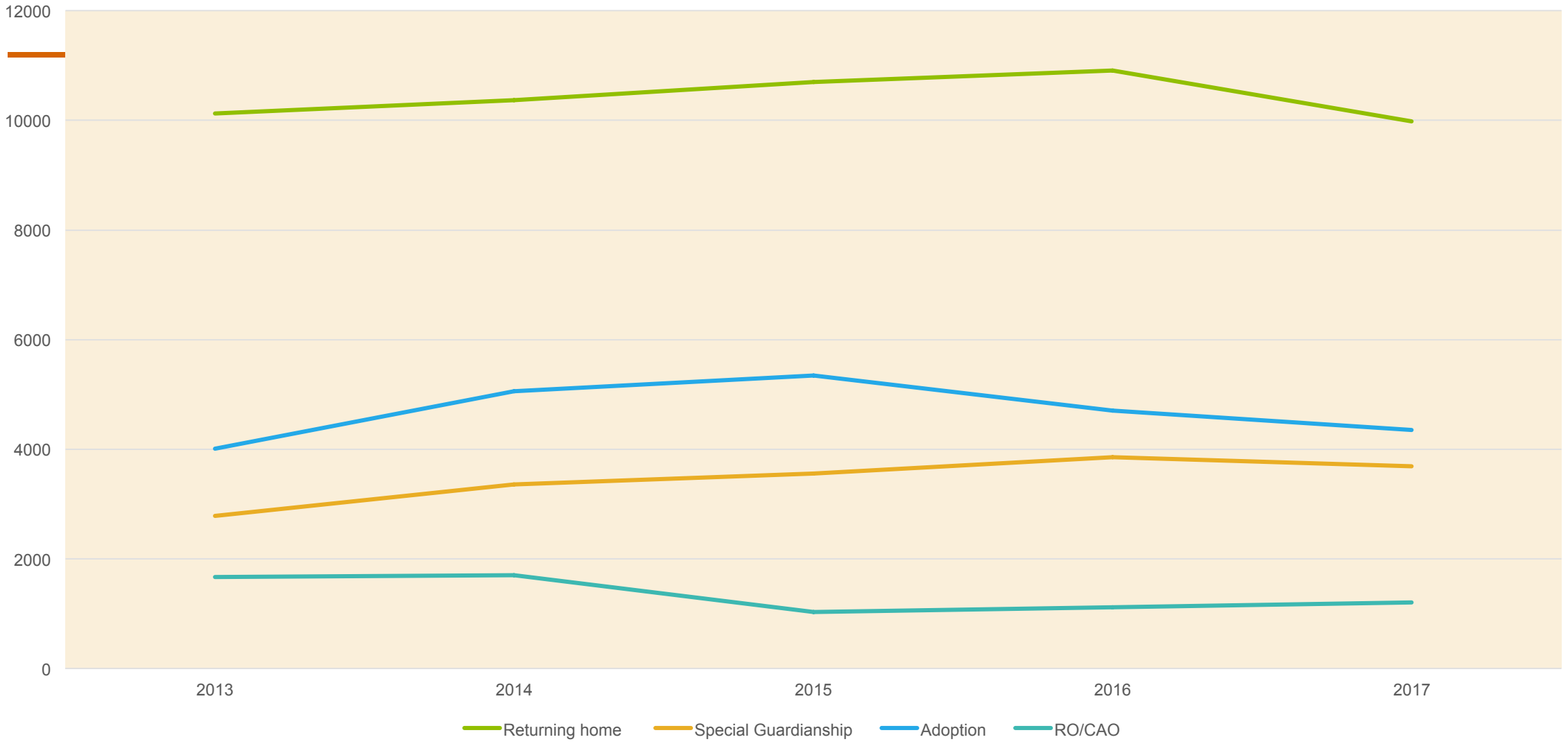
'the family is playing a game and that no one is ever to know the secret.'

Weider, 1974

Emerging Adoption Themes

- Separation and loss –genealogical confusion.
- Identity – ‘Who am I’ / ‘Where do I come from?’
- Belonging – to the adoptive family but the birth family too.
- Telling the story – Life Story Books/Work

Children Leaving Care - 2013-2017



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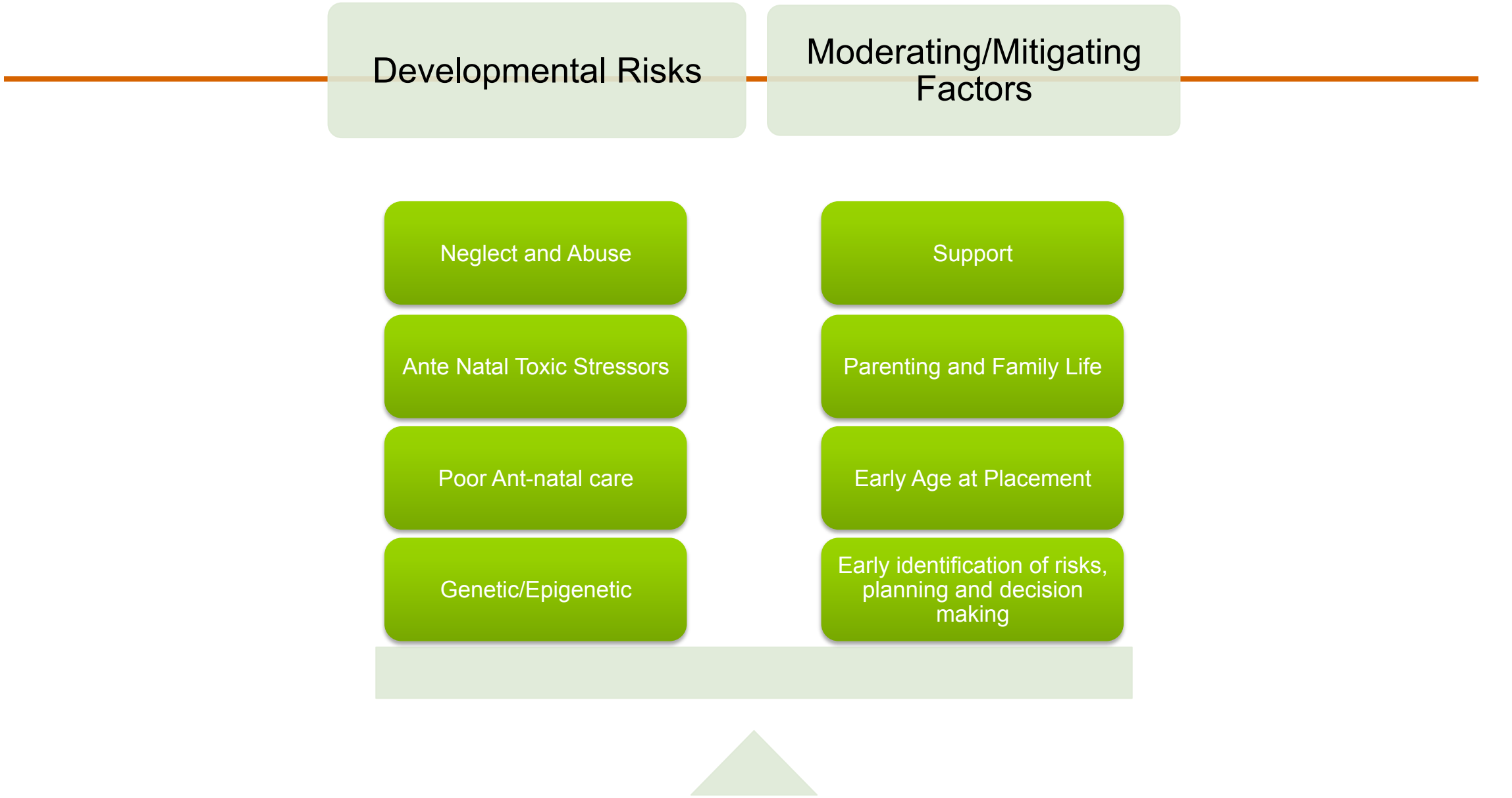
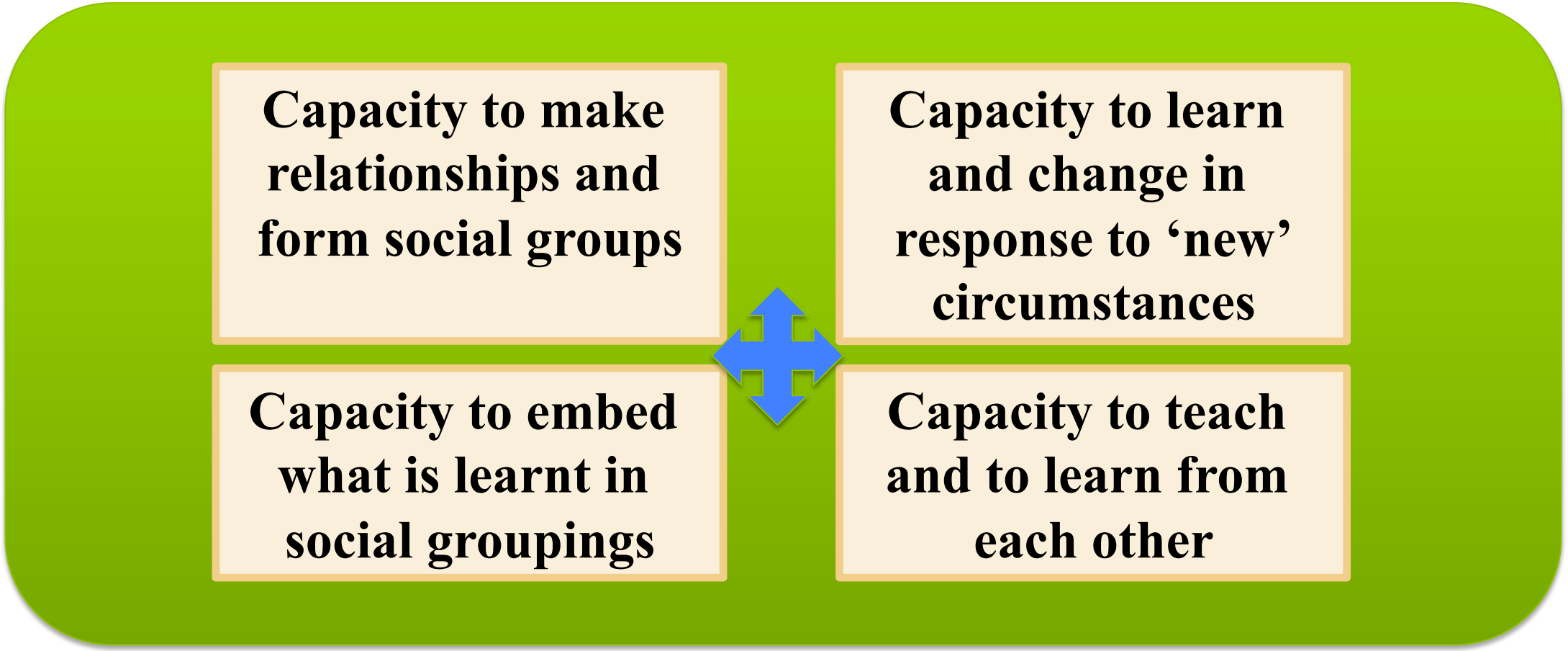

Developmental Risks
Moderating/Mitigating Factors
Neglect and Abuse
Ante Natal Toxic Stressors
Poor Ant-natal care
Genetic/Epigenetic
Support
Parenting and Family Life
Early Age at Placement
Early identification of risks, planning and decision making

Human Species
SURVIVAL AND ADAPTABILITY



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Human Beings *survive* and *adapt* in the context of the experience of relationships, parenting, family life, community and society

But each of these contextual factors can be a source of tension, disagreement and conflict including abuse and neglect.

Adaptation – growth and development through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood - reflects a multi-factorial, interacting and dynamic set of factors.

Basic survival strategies are embedded in each of us.

New people and opportunities can re-formulate those survival strategies

But

New people and opportunity can also be experienced as an-going source of threat

How do we respond to threat?

Primary Physiological and Psychological Responses to Threat

- **Fight** – repel the threat by attack
- **Flight** – the urge to run – can be physical or psychological
- **Freeze** - acting dead

Instinctive responses where the primary purpose is protection/survival

Stress Response

Instinctive Physiological/Psychological response to address the threat and restore equilibrium

Human Beings *survive* and *adapt* because they form close and meaningful relationships with each other to a degree that most other species do not

Trust is key to making and sustaining relationships

But

People can be a source of threat that requires individuals – adults and children - to develop survival strategies.

And this may mean significant compromise and adaptation in the heightened anticipation of threat and the need to control it.

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Adoption as an intervention

- Life long intervention
- Grafts a child on to a new family tree
- Stability and permanence
- The strengths, capacities and vulnerabilities of the adult carers
- The impact of the past on the present

Interventions to support Adoption

- The nature of the problem?
- Complexity of child's history including the 'unknown'
- Interventions with whom - child/ adopters/carers/ family
- The problem of a shared perspective across services and professionals
- Adoption specific interventions or a generic service

The Enormity of Change for the Child

Family Context

- The emotional atmosphere of family life
- Expectations of intimacy and belonging
- Beliefs about commitment and the concept of 'forever''

Identity

- As an adopted child grafted on to a new family tree

Social Context and Culture

- Class
- Culture, Ethnicity and Religion
- Education and Participation

The Past

- Birth parents, Grandparents, Siblings
- What happened to me?
- Why was I adopted?

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Normative Challenge of Adoptive Family Life

- Family Making from a Family Life that has broken
- Co-construction of a family life – child and adoptive parents, siblings, grandparents and birth family
- Interactive, Relational world of development
- Creating and sustaining are complex tasks
- Powerful forces are at work that both enable and disable the conditions that are necessary for the child's development

Normative Challenge of Adoptive Family Life

- Communicative Openness (Brodzinsky)
- Understanding the child's (painful/disturbing) history
- Acceptance of the child's hesitation/anxiety/lengthy period of adjustment
- Responsiveness to curiosity
- Ability to seek early help
- Adaptability in parenting expectations and style

What is the state of our knowledge –
ASSESSMENT
INTERVENTION
OUTCOMES
that allows us to address our responsibilities to the child?

Adoption remains a 'contested' area of policy and practice

In Law
In the Courts
In Society
In Policy and Practice

We have a primary responsibility to argue for its strengths, address its weaknesses, use its opportunities and mitigate its risks

Primary Task in Adoption

- The creation of a secure, loving family life for a child that reliably and sensitively provides them with a *relational world* of opportunity and resources
- It is the *relational world* that is key to promoting and connecting the child and adult to opportunity and resources through the various stages of the life course