



Statement on the use of DNA testing to determine racial background

Background

Some local authorities have begun commissioning DNA testing to determine racial backgrounds for some looked after children where parental racial group is uncertain. Popular interest in genetic testing to determine racial ancestry has also been sparked by various television programmes in recent years which have discussed the use of genetic testing to demonstrate geographic movements of people through history, and even to determine that given individuals today have markers for different ethnic groups or geographic regions.

Why ethnicity may be uncertain

Uncertainty about racial inheritance may arise in different situations, such as unknown paternity, or where a child's appearance does not seem to match the stated racial group of the parents. Sometimes children are conceived in situations where the biological parents do not know one another well, do not share much information about their backgrounds, or there may have been family secrets. Furthermore, some parents do not stay in contact, and the opportunity to later find out more for the sake of the child is lost.

Why knowledge about racial origin is important

For looked after children, there are both immediate and long-term reasons for wanting to know as much as possible about ethnic background. Here it is important to distinguish between DNA racial ancestry and ethnicity. DNA racial ancestry tells us simply about a genetic code, a blue-print for certain physical characteristics, whereas ethnicity tells us about the cultural identity of an individual. DNA ancestry does not necessarily predict ethnicity, thus knowing that a child's father was Indian does not tell us anything about that father's way of life, religion or culture. Certainly there is evidence that it is usually in the child's best interests to be in a placement which can reflect as fully as possible their ethnic background, culture, language and religion, and this becomes even more important for long term and permanent placement. . In addition, many children enter care with health inequalities, which must be addressed. Knowledge of a child's racial background can assist with appropriate screening for certain hereditary conditions which are prevalent in particular ethnic groups.

Learning about one's ethnic and cultural background and religion is a long term process, which occurs naturally, over time, within a family. Yet for children who are separated from their birth family, particular care must be taken to seek a placement which can reflect these factors as closely as possible.

Developing a sense of 'who I am', is a process which is on-going throughout childhood, but comes into focus as adolescence approaches. One of the main

developmental tasks of adolescence is the search for identity, which for any individual is a complex process. But for a young person whose racial and ethnic background is uncertain, this task is far more difficult. For example, for an individual whose appearance suggests a dual heritage of white and African or Asian, not knowing if one's roots lie in an African or Asian culture can make it impossible to move forward and explore an identity rooted in one or the other, or both. For all concerned, the 'not knowing' can be the most difficult thing to deal with, for knowledge points in a certain direction and allows action. And this is where high quality social work practise by skilled and experienced professionals is crucial to support and assist young people through the process of exploring identity, including coping with uncertainty.

Use of DNA testing to determine racial background

Given the issues discussed above, it is understandable that professionals would wish to provide children and young people with as much information as possible about their ethnic background, including the use of DNA testing by commercial laboratories which offer results in the format of a percentage breakdown from different ethnic groups.

However, after wide-ranging consultation with colleagues in clinical genetics departments and the British Society for Human Genetics, the BAAF Health Group Advisory Committee **does not recommend the use of DNA testing to determine ethnicity, as these tests have not been adequately evaluated or validated as being accurate.** While the appeal of such a definitive numerical answer is understandable, practitioners must avoid the risk of making decisions about a child's future based on information from a non-validated test. Similarly, using possibly inaccurate information as a guide to assisting young people in identity formation is not acceptable. The reasons for this recommendation are outlined below:

1. Ancestry categories may be misleading

Standard testing will offer an estimate of percentage DNA ancestry make-up in the following categories:

- a) European
- b) Native American
- c) East Asian – including peoples from Japan, China, Mongolia, Korea, SE Asia, Pacific Islanders and Philippines.
- d) Africa – including sub-Saharan peoples

What may be unclear to consumers of this service is that European categories include peoples from the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. Additional testing (for additional fees) can further discriminate Northern European, Southern European, Middle Eastern and South Asian ancestry.

2. Ancestry does not determine racial appearance

There is POOR correlation between DNA ancestry and colour of skin.

3. There is no data on normal populations to help interpret the results of DNA ancestry testing. In other words many apparently white British people may have a mixed ancestry on genetic testing and yet have no identity with these non-European elements of their ancestry.

4. DNA ancestry is not the same as ethnicity. The former is simply a sequence of DNA, the latter is the socio-cultural context of a child's life. What is more

relevant to the child is how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. In other words, racial appearance is likely to be a more helpful guide to placement than a statistical account of their ancestry.

Case study

Baby Joel is born in Birmingham to a white mother who is half Irish and half Scottish. Paternity is unknown. Joel is 6 months old and has olive skin, brown eyes and dark brown hair. He has a care plan for adoption and is currently living with foster carers who are both white. His social worker is questioning whether the father may be Asian. There are several white couples who are a good match for Joel but linking has been deferred pending DNA ancestry testing as the social worker believes that Joel should have an opportunity to understand his ethnic inheritance should he prove to be of mixed race.

Testing results state that he is 50% European, 10% African, 40% East Asian.

Where does this leave Joel? Firstly we do not know if this combination is feasible from 2 white parents - it probably is. Even assuming that Joel's father is Asian from Indian extraction this would be reflected within the 'European' component of the testing result. He could be mistakenly placed with a mixed race couple where one of the partners is East Asian. Finally, even if his father is Indian, DNA ancestry cannot tell us about ethnicity - in other words what religious and cultural practices were important to his father. He could be mistakenly placed with a family of a completely different ethnic make-up. Most important for Joel is that he is placed in a family who are a good physical match to his size, skin colour and hair colour and that placement is not delayed by mistaken attempts to reflect an ethnicity that can only be best guessed.

Conclusion

The use of genetic testing to determine ethnic background is not recommended. High quality social work practice in collecting as much family background information as possible, and expertise in assessing and balancing the many competing factors relevant to child placement, along with sensitive and skilled life story work to assist with exploration of identity, remain the cornerstones of child placement work.

March 2008