

the
ADOPTION
journey

How to navigate the bumps in the road
and to make sure you don't go it alone.



Welcome

Let's get started...

The **ADOPTION** process

1.
START
find an agency.



2.
TALK
to a social worker
to see if adoption is
right for you.



8.
PANEL 2
when a panel
decides if you
can adopt an
individual.



7.
MATCH
when you are
linked with
a child.



9.
MEET
get to know
your child.



10.
MOVE
move your child
into your life.



3.

PREPARE

get a real picture of adoption at preparation classes.



4.

APPLY

fill in forms and give references.



5.

ASSESS

work through home study with your social worker.



6.

PANEL 1

when a panel decides if you can adopt.



11.

ADOPT

make it official.



12.

LIVE

the rest of your life as a family... that's when the journey really begins.



CONTENTS

From the Minister

Why this publication?

SECTION 1 – THE INS AND OUTS

About adoption and how it's changed, who the children are who need adopting and the people who choose to adopt.

From me to you

A personal letter from one adopter to another.

From the beginning

Sarah's story of being adopted, and then adopting a child.

Changing times, changing families

How adoption has changed and what this means for you as a potential adopter.

Be prepared

An insight into adoption from a social worker.

SECTION 2 – THE NUTS AND BOLTS

About the adoption process from initial enquiry, through home study and panels, to matching, introductions and becoming a family.

First steps

Finding an agency, application, preparation.

Assessment

Your social worker, home study, references and panel.

Matching

Linking and matching, matching panels, introductions.

Legal focus

An insight into key terms you might come across and what they mean.

SECTION 3 – TWISTS AND TURNS

About the challenges of adoptive parenting from attachment theory and therapeutic approaches to life story work and self-care.

Moving day

The journey begins...

Getting to know you

The early days of family life – what to expect and tips for the first few weeks.

We are more than the sum of our parts

Some common challenges of adoptive parenting – and why they are only part of the story.

I am here and so are you

Attachment theory and therapeutic parenting.

Help!

Adoption support: how it works and what you're entitled to.

Telling stories

Life story work and its importance in shaping identity.

The Adoption Triangle

You, your child and their birth family – managing contact and expectations.

Teach the teacher

Why adopted children need special consideration in school and how to talk to teaching staff about their needs.

You cannot pour from an empty cup...

Why self-care and support are important and how to make them work for you.

Now over to you...

Notes

In case you have any more questions...





Hello,

Deciding to adopt is a huge decision and one that needs and deserves support. The Scottish Government is committed to making the adoption process as smooth and uncomplicated as possible and I'm delighted that this publication can help to achieve that. I am grateful to Adoption UK (Scotland) and the Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland, for their experience and expertise in developing this fantastic guide, which aims to accompany you throughout your adoption journey, to help prepare you for the reality of adoption and to point you in the right direction for further help and support.

To help inform the publication, the authors spoke to adopters and to social workers who work in adoption about what information would be helpful and which topics were important to them. All the content that follows has been informed by this research and I believe will give you insight and confidence into what can be a complex and emotional process. The publication also features the voices of adoptive parents throughout as they share their adoption experiences and advice. It's clear to me from the people I talk to about adoption, that the support they receive makes a real difference: the intention of this guide is to prepare you for the realities and to signpost wherever possible, to the information you need, when you need it most.

So many of our efforts, and rightly so I think, are about getting it right for every child and making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in. But so many children would not live to their full potential if they didn't have a loving and supportive adult to care for them. We must always allow space to acknowledge and recognise families and parents, and the key role they play in a child's life. You will be the most important resource and influence in your child's life, shaping the people they become. In turn, we want to make sure that you are supported, empowered and enabled.

Whatever this journey brings you, I wish you all the very best.



Maree Todd MSP

Minister for Children and Young People

Section 1

THE INS AND OUTS

About adoption and how it's changed, who the children are who need adopting and the people who choose to adopt.

If you're reading this...

it means you are taking the first steps on your adoption journey. This publication is intended to make sure that you don't travel alone. It won't tell you everything you need to know (we needed this to fit on a shelf), but it will point you in the right direction

When I talk about the adoption journey, I'm talking about a whole lifetime as a family. It doesn't end when you adopt a child: that's just the start. And I should say right now that you shouldn't think about 'if' I need help – it's a definite 'when' I need help.

When I first started to think about adoption, my dream, my fantasy if you like, was more about having a family and being a parent. I imagined picnics in the park, happy Christmases, holidays, day trips, arguing over who gets to watch what on the telly.

Well, lots of those have come to pass, but what I didn't factor in was the sheer amount of energy, time, thought and planning involved to make those things happen.

As you go through the prep process I'm sure you will think about the children that the social workers are talking about. You will no doubt be deeply moved and horrified about the awful things that happen to children. I did the same, yet did I really think that would be my child? No. I had lots of strategies and answers for the questions that the social workers posed. I also had an infinite amount of love and patience to give. How trite that sounds to me now.

The biggest learning curve for me as an adoptive parent has been that I cannot parent my child as a birth child. Just as all parents need to parent their children individually to account for their personality, and uniqueness, the same is true for our adoptive children. The difference is that our children come to us having started their life elsewhere and bring many challenges with them.

To fully support my child and our family I needed to access extra support. For me this was in the form of connecting with other adoptive parents, going to family events, researching more about trauma and childhood, and tapping into social work resources and knowledge. We are doing things that parents and birth children do, but just more tailored to our family needs.

I have also found that, as my child grows older, we need different strategies for various development stages. Again, finding out about what resources are out there and talking to adoptive parents who have faced similar challenges helps me. It is good to feel that you are not alone, to be with others who 'get it'. Being with other adopted children has benefitted my child too; they don't feel that they are the 'odd one out', they have fun, they feel free to be themselves and most importantly have peer relationships.

Being with other adoptive families helps me put things into perspective, shows me that I am doing the best I can, and reminds me to be kind to myself. Most importantly it offers support, and I know that I will need to tap into this for probably a life time.

If there's one thing you take away from reading this publication, it's that you don't have to do this on your own. I hope the subjects we've covered give you an honest insight into adoption and where to go when you need a hand.

Enjoy the journey, and good luck!

Susie

Birth mum, adoptive mum and foster carer.



Sarah's story

Adopted as a baby in the 1970s, then became an adoptive parent in 2003

I was born to a 16-year-old mother who felt unable to bring me up, so I went into foster care at birth and was adopted at five months old. My parents had one hour long visit and one sheet of paper about my routine to prepare them, which seems incredible now when you look at the amount of preparation adoptive parents go through. My parents always wanted more than one child, so they asked the agency they had adopted with to keep them in mind for any other children that came along. When I was three my parents went to visit the social work team to talk about another possible adoption and came home with nine-month old twin boys. No introduction, no transition period and no background information. The only thing they were told was, "Not to expect much, they'll never get very far". There was certainly nothing about trauma or neglect, which we later found both my brothers had been subjected to, and which profoundly affected their behaviour and development.

By the time my brothers were two they were already showing worrying signs of developmental delay and severe behavioural problems. As they got older these issues became more and more serious. The boys could be violent and disruptive, and the stress of bringing them up was a large part of why my parents' marriage ended. 30 years ago, conditions such as FASD and attachment disorders were not known about or discussed. Now we are far more aware of trauma, neglect and developmental disorders and it is widely acknowledged that they are suffered in some form by many adopted children. That is a fact that adoptive parents must live with. It's one that cannot be changed, but by acknowledging it, it can be tackled and supported. We must always bear in mind that it's not the person that's the problem, but the things they bring with them.

I have two birth children, and thought my family was complete, until it became clear that the baby my adopted brother's partner was going to have couldn't be left in their care. My adopted brother never really escaped the trauma of his childhood, despite the best efforts of my mother – and later of my husband and myself – and led a chaotic and

addictive lifestyle. It was never really an option to say no to taking on the boy I now think of as my son – he was already part of my family. The process to adopt was slow, invasive and often upsetting. The feeling that we could lose him was never far away until we were given parental rights. But would I go back and do it again? Absolutely! It was always the right decision and he was worth fighting for. It was so hard in many ways but to be given a little life that is now entrusted to me is a privilege that has no comparison.

My son is now five, has just started school and is doing well. He is extremely challenging, demanding and exhausting and had we not already been experienced parents, I know we would have struggled a lot more. Post-adoption support is essential, and I wish there was more help easily accessible for my son. He knows he is adopted but his two big brothers aren't and that will be hard for him in years to come. There are many hurdles still to face for him and us all as a family. It is truly my hope that he is given the best opportunity to be whatever he wants, regardless of his origins and the difficulties they have brought him.

Sarah's story tells us so much about how adoption has changed. These days, you will never be in a situation where the only information you have about a child fits on a sheet of A4. And, although children needing adoption now come with more complex needs, this is widely recognised and support is more easily available.

Tip:

See www.andviolet.co.uk for an insight into the realities of adoption today.



Changing times, changing families

How adoption has changed and what it means for you as an adopter

1. The children who need to be adopted are older and have more complex needs

There are a lot fewer adoptions now than there used to be. There were 543 adoptions in Scotland in 2017, around half the number recorded per year in the mid-1980s, and around a quarter of the number recorded in the late 1960s.

Single or unmarried mothers are no longer shamed into giving their babies up; it's very rare now for a baby to be relinquished 'for a better life'. As societal attitudes have changed, so too have the children that need new families. Most children being placed for adoption come from the care system. They have lived a life marked by abuse or neglect, the very reason they cannot be raised by their birth family. Substance abuse during pregnancy means that some children will have an uncertain prognosis when they are placed with you. In many cases, their adoption is contested by the birth family.

Today's adoption picture may be more complex, but what hasn't changed is that children need supportive, loving families to bring them up. Adoption works very well for most of these children, although they are likely to have more complex needs driven by their earlier life experiences and may be affected by developmental disorders or delays. Whatever their background, they will carry the trauma of being separated from their birth family. A new start with you does not erase their history – you will carry it too – but don't forget you won't be alone in this. Remember too that your child will be more than a list of issues: they are an individual first and foremost, capable of many things given time, attention and love.



Profile 1

Chloe, 13 months

Chloe has a lovely smile and infectious giggle. She has been in a stable foster care placement since she was four weeks old and has developed strong attachments with her carers. She is a very happy and contented baby, who is sociable and enjoys and thrives on interaction and attention from her carers and their wider family. She is starting to crawl, eats well and sleeps through the night

She's used to living in a house with other children and getting out and about during the day. Chloe's birth mother has a diagnosis of mild learning difficulties and possible undiagnosed mental health issues. She reports she did not drink or smoke during her pregnancy.

Ethnic/racial origins: birth mother; black Zimbabwean, birth father; unknown.

Family needed: a one or two parent family. A family who reflect Chloe's heritage is preferable, or a family who could promote her identity and support her to live in a predominantly ethnically white country would also be considered.

Contact plans: annual letterbox contact with birth mother.

Support: Chloe does not have any presenting additional needs.

Legal status: Compulsory supervision order.



Profile 2

Lexis, 6, Amelia, 5 and Skyla, 3

Lexis, Amelia and Skyla were placed with their current carers last year, along with their older brother. The girls have a good relationship and tend to look out for one another. Lexis is a bright, extremely thoughtful and caring young girl. She lacks confidence in groups but one-on-one is a chatterbox. Amelia is confident, chatty and likes attention. She is a cheeky little character and makes

everyone laugh. Skyla has a charming personality and although initially shy around new people, soon begins interacting when she feels comfortable. She is sociable and thrives on attention, with a winning smile. All the girls like being outdoors, colouring and painting, enjoy music and like watching Peppa Pig together.

Ethnic/racial origins: white British.

Family needed: a family able to maintain good routines and firm boundaries, with lots of energy and willingness to spend time outdoors.

Contact plans: annual indirect contact with birth mother; indirect and direct contact with older sibling with a plan of adoption.

Legal status: Permanence order with authority to adopt.



Profile 3

Alfie, 1 year old

Alfie is a settled and contented baby who rarely becomes upset unless he is tired or hungry. He has lived with his foster carers from when he was a few days old. He has responded well to routine and sleeps through the night. Alfie is a very loving child who is able to make it clear when he needs a change or a feed. He loves to be spoken to and responds with smiles and giggles. Although

Alfie is a healthy baby, routine genetic testing shows he has a chromosome 15q duplication. He was also exposed to drugs and alcohol pre-birth, which may have implications for his future health and development.

Ethnic/racial origins: white British.

Family needed: an adoptive family with a good support network who understand Alfie's diagnosis and accept the potential long-term implications. A family able to cope with uncertainty and be robust and resilient. They must be confident in working with professionals and be able to take a significant period of adoption leave.

Contact plans: annual indirect contact with birth mother; one-off letter-box contact with the birth father.

Support: a support plan will be put in place prior to a match being agreed.

Legal status: Permanence order.

2. The picture of who can be a good adoptive parent has shifted

The pool of people available to become adopters has broadened as now the most important things agencies look for are resilience, tenacity, commitment and therapeutic parenting skills, rather than a 'traditional' family set up. There is no 'ideal' family, but any background or setting could be right for a child, as long as there is love and care in abundance. People choose to build their family through adoption for many reasons...

I've always thought that I would be a father one day, and all of my friends and family at some point have said to me that I would be a brilliant father (big cliché but hey).

My partner and I met whilst working in social care, and a big part of my career has been spent working directly with children and young people and young adults. So I have always had an affinity to children.

We discussed using a surrogate, and we were both very honest about how that would make us feel. If one of us was the actual biological father, neither of us felt we would be able to cope with that feeling of not quite being equal. We had quite a few female friends offer, but it just wasn't right for us. Adoption was the only answer, and it has been so rewarding.

Jack and Euan, parents to a one-year old daughter.

"Everybody goes through a path in life - and I got to the point on mine where I needed to have a family. I read an article about adoption in my area and it mentioned that there were 250 children waiting to be adopted. That was the start of everything. I got more information and found that anyone can adopt - it didn't matter if you were on your own - so I took the next step and asked to be contacted. I went on a preparation course and was assigned a social worker."

Daniela, adoptive Mum to a four-year old son.

3. Birth families stay with the child, even if the child doesn't stay with them

For many years, it was a commonly held perception that adoption meant a new chapter, a clean break from a child's birth family to join a new one. But talking to people who've been adopted and learning from their experiences means that is changing. Finding a way of sustaining important links to a child's past is good for everyone involved, most of all the child. Children can benefit greatly from having a continuing understanding of their life before they were adopted, and possibly some ongoing contact with family members, without this undermining the strong, stable, loving relationships they have with their adoptive family.

Although it is important for them and their sense of place and identity, it can be hard for you, as their parent, to acknowledge and include another family in their lives. While direct contact is still rare, indirect contact is common. As an adopter, you need to be prepared to meet birth parents and write and receive letters through letterbox contact. You also need to be prepared for the disappointment of not receiving expected contact and the impact this will have on your child. Once again, this may paint a less-than-rosy picture of adoption, but it is a reality that can be managed if you are well prepared. Knowing their whole story, not just selected chapters, is important to a child's sense of self and development, and by maintaining a link with their past, you are supporting your child to grow in the best possible way.



4. It's now acknowledged that parenting an adopted child is different from parenting birth children

Because children come to adoptive parents when they are older, and come with additional and more complex needs, parenting approaches need to be different. Parents may find that approaches that have worked for birth children do not work for adopted children. Traditional parenting approaches and mainstream education might not apply either. Bringing up an adopted child and parenting them in a way that meets their needs may draw criticism from those who don't have all the information you do. Support, information and advice from other adoptive parents, organisations and professionals is critical in navigating the challenges of therapeutic parenting (or re-parenting). But accept this and you are half way there; information is power after all. Adopters find that sensitively attuned care means they become the parents that particular child needs. What works for one family may not work for another, but that is ok.

"I have been involved in adoption work for over 20 years and have seen so many significant changes over this time. I love the fact that the basic premise is still unchanged. What I mean by this is that a child who, sadly, cannot live with their birth family, can be placed in an adoptive family who understands the child's history in order to give them the best possible future. For me, that is the magic of adoption."

Ravinder Kaur, Trainer Consultant and one of the founding members of AFA Scotland.

Tip: We focus on therapeutic parenting later (page 44).

Be prepared

A senior social worker who is also an adoptive dad talks about how you can get the most from your adoption experience

A wide range of people can adopt

In Scotland today, you can adopt a child if you are single or in a relationship, married or in a civil partnership. You can adopt whether or not you have children already. You do not need to be a homeowner – you can be renting your home. You can be male, female, lesbian, gay, straight, trans or bisexual.

In addition to these criteria, you must be over 21, have stopped fertility treatment if you have been trying to conceive, and have a spare bedroom. Your health and financial circumstances will also be explored as part of your assessment.

What is perhaps more important is the energy, resilience and commitment to parent a child throughout their lives as if they were born to you. Good support from family and friends will also be needed to make this possible.

Some things might make adopting more difficult, but you can work on them

There are some things that will stop people. I have had some difficult conversations over the years. Usually from the very first conversation we are finding out if there is anything people flag up that might be a barrier. But if we talk about things that need to change early enough in the process then people have a chance to do something about it. For instance, if you were adopting with us, smoking is a definite no, but you can take some time to give up, then start the process of being assessed.

Other than that, there's not really a specific list of things that prevent someone from adopting, but we'll look at any health issues that might have a bearing on people's capacity to parent a child in the long term. Our number one priority is the children, and we have to look at how well placed prospective adopters are to parent children who often have had a difficult start in life, and who will require skilled and resourceful parents. That may sound blunt, but we are acting on behalf of children who need resilient people to look after them.



We do not necessarily view people who have had 'perfect' lives as ideal adopters. I often find that people who have already faced challenges in their life and overcome them have developed a resilience that makes them better prepared for adoption, especially if they have sought help and support when they needed it. If, as an adoptive parent, you acknowledge that you need help and get it at an early stage, then you'll be more likely to overcome challenges.

This is what I'd suggest to help you through the adoption process

First, be open and honest; with yourself and with your social worker. We are not looking for people to show us they have led exemplary lives and will make 'perfect' parents. Having said that social workers know that we all edit reality a little to show ourselves in a better light!

Check out your support network. Whether you are single or adopting as a couple, we want to see people capable of starting and sustaining stable relationships. We probably look more closely at a single adopter's support network as it is more challenging going it alone, but we would ask all prospective adopters to think carefully about the people in their life that will help and support them.

Prepare and learn, and then keep on preparing and learning. Read up as much as you can about the children who come to be adopted, and about how to parent them. Get involved with adoption organisations and try and meet as many people as possible to get lots of different viewpoints. It's useful to hear stories from other people apart from us. Be curious and question everything.

Try to get into reflective writing – this is a useful tool when going through your home study. I usually give the people I work with topics to think and write about and then we talk about them afterwards. Some people find this part of the process really difficult, others find it great and that it reveals things about themselves or their partner they had no idea about.



Think about your own family upbringing and how it made you who you are now. It's useful to reflect on things like who brought you up and how they approached it, and whether you would like to follow the same path.

Be prepared to be challenged

Some people question why everyone else gets to be a parent without any sort of scrutiny, yet people who adopt have to jump through many hoops. But we are intervening in the most extreme way in another family's life and removing a child from their birth family, so we have a duty to place the children with a family best equipped to manage any challenges that may arise from that child's early experiences. By the end of preparation most people understand this – and a lot comment that everyone should do a preparation course to be a parent – birth or adoptive.

You might be surprised that we want you to be very open with your children about their origins. The shadow of old views about a clean slate still falls on some families. There is now a presumption of some contact between the child and their birth family, unless it is judged that this would be detrimental to a child's wellbeing. This will involve at the very least an annual exchange of letters. But as adopters you need to think seriously about bringing a whole other family into your life – one whose values you may not share.

Maintaining the presence of a birth family in a child's life has been prompted by research with adult adoptees. Many talk about a sense of always feeling something was missing when they haven't been told until later in life they were adopted, which has then undermined their trust in everything. Also, for more practical reasons, it's useful to know of any medical conditions that might develop in the family and impact on your child, as some things don't manifest until later in life. You'll play a very important role in giving your child a sense of identity and where they came from. You need to tell the truth about where they came from and their story, so they don't make up a narrative of their own. You must make it clear to your child that they can talk about their birth family and you will not be offended or hurt by this – even if you find it hard – they may keep quiet for fear of hurting you and leave an important part of their lives unexplored, or do so without your support.

Take your family on your journey with you

It is important to involve your family and close friends in your journey. People choose different stages of the adoption process to involve their family, but it is important for them to understand how they can best support you, and to manage their expectations about a child joining their family through adoption. Recently I was lucky enough to be invited to a family BBQ by a couple I was assessing, which gave me the opportunity to talk to all the key people in that family's support network. After the BBQ we showed a few short video clips about adoption support, and then had a 'Q&A' session so that the family could ask me anything that they wanted to know about adoption. I found this experience really helpful, and I think the family did too.

We are here to guide you through the process

The preparation groups are a chance for you to find out more about the reality of adoption in Scotland today, and work out whether you want to go ahead with your plans to adopt.

They are designed to give you a sense of what you are letting yourself in for and what support you will be able to access in the future. Some of you may decide to further develop your skills or capacity in certain areas and come back to the process at a later date. Most people tend to be keen to move onto the next stage of the process straight away.

My role as a social worker is to explain as best I can all the ins and outs of adoption and help you access as much information as possible. Some adopters comment that we end up knowing them better than they know themselves; I'm not sure about that, but we will certainly get you to a place where you know yourself inside-out.



What was your social worker like?

Adopters tell us about their impressions and experiences of social workers...

“Our main social worker was just excellent

and we do consider her to be a friend now (a bit cheesy but true). It's so important to have a strong and trusting relationship with your social worker who does the assessment, as they get to know you and your family very, very well. We made our adoption official and got married on the same day, so our social worker was able to pop next door and be a witness at our wedding. That's how much she means to us and how much of an important part she played in helping us create a family.”

Jack and Euan.

Tip: Watch this clip about reversible thinking – things can change
www.familiesoutside.org.uk/reversible-thinking-video

Helpful resources...

Related by Adoption, a handbook for grandparents and other relatives by Hedi Argent.

Check out Open Nest (www.theopennest.co.uk) – they have lots of useful clips to share with family and friends about adoption – such as *Brighter Thinking*.

“Your social worker – someone you've never met before

who ends up knowing more about you than anyone else! She was strict, serious, but lovely. She came every week and talked each time on a different topic – work, family, love, travels. You build a relationship with them – not a friendship. They know everything about you, but you know very little about them. It can be hard as it's very one-way. I understand now why that's the case but at times it was hard.”

Daniela.

“From the very first phone call, right up to now


(nearly three years after adopting) I've felt supported. My social worker was like a professional friend. It all felt very relaxed, and she took things at my pace. She was very informative and stayed with me all the way through.”

Rebecca.



Section 2

**THE
NUTS
AND
BOLTS**



About the adoption process from initial enquiry through home study and panels, to matching, introductions and becoming a family.

First steps

Finding an agency, application, preparation

Where to start

Talk. Research. Talk some more. That's what you need to do first when thinking about adoption. If you have a friend or a family member that has experience of adoption, grill them for information. Or call Adoption UK's helpline for a chat. They know all about the ins and outs of adoption. They say forewarned is forearmed, and it's apt when we're talking adoption. We've added a list of reading material on the next page, to help you get started.

When you make initial enquiries with an agency, you might be surprised at what they ask you: questions tend to get personal quickly. This is to be certain that you qualify at a very basic level to explore adoption. Our advice is to embrace the process, be open and honest, and be prepared to answer and ask a lot of questions.

Who can you adopt with in Scotland?

There are 32 local authorities in Scotland that offer adoption services. There are also four voluntary agencies that do the same: Scottish Adoption, St. Andrew's Children's Society, Barnardo's Scotland Adoption Placement Services and St. Margaret's Children and Family Care Society. It's worth comparing what each agency offers and talking to people from at least a couple of them. One might be a better fit for you than another. To find out more about the different agencies available, use the 'find an agency' resource on Scotland's Adoption Register website.

www.scotlandsadoptionregister.org.uk/find-an-agency



Applying

Agencies usually ask you to complete two stages of application – something like an initial interest form, which has basic information – and then a more detailed application form. You'll be asked to provide references. These might not be used straight away but they will be called on at some point in the process. Don't feel that this part of the process is out of your hands: ask your social worker what you can do to get involved and help the application along. It's a good idea to prepare the people you've put forward as referees too, to give them an idea of the things they may be asked to talk about.

Preparation

Anyone considering adoption must go through the preparation process. It will help you get to know about the realities of adoption and how prepared you are to deal with them. It will give you an insight into the children who are awaiting adoption, to their backgrounds and the trauma they may have suffered, and what qualities you need as a person to parent an adopted child. And, perhaps most useful of all, it gives you a chance to meet other people going through the same thing as you, and people who've been there before. We're often told that some of the most valuable information gained from preparation is that shared by people who've already adopted. A lot of the information you hear will be difficult. Sometimes it will seem unreal, as you can't yet relate it to a child you are trying to bring up. Hold on to what you find out, as you may need it later. What might seem irrelevant or distant now will come sharply into focus when you have a child in your life who needs you.

At the end of your preparation course, the decision to move on to the next stage – formal home visits and assessments – is a mutual one made by you and the agency you are working with.

"Someone phoned me after Christmas. She was very friendly. Too friendly! She asked a lot of personal questions. At the time it felt quite invasive but looking back I can see it was just a part of the process: she wanted to make sure no one was wasting their time. She also explained a lot about adoption."

**Daniela, adoptive Mum
to a four-year old boy.**

"What I learned at the preparation groups was really unexpected. There was a lot of information about the science behind how children grow and how they come to be damaged by what happens in their early lives. I was nervous to start with, but half an hour into the first group I was totally at ease and decided to just go with it and learn as much as I could. I also tried to educate the rest of the family about what I was learning, about trauma and how it affected people.

You can't go into the process with a child in your mind - you have to go into it and learn about adoption and how to incorporate another person into your family. Follow the process and put the work in."

Rebecca, adoptive Mum to Julia, three and a half.

Checks and balances

What information your agencies will gather on you

Disclosure Scotland

Agencies will apply for an enhanced police check for each applicant and adult member of your household. This will tell them about any convictions you have had in Scotland. (They will also ask for a check to be completed in the relevant country if you have lived outside Scotland as an adult). The police check is simply to confirm that you have no convictions or cautions that would prevent you from being an adoptive parent. Remember, having past convictions doesn't necessarily exclude you, but it is important that you share anything that might come up with your adoption agency. They can then work through any potential issues with you.

Health checks

Children need adoptive parents who are physically and emotionally well and able to cope with the rigours of parenting. Your GP will share the report they write on your health with the agency's Medical Advisor, who will then talk to you and your social worker about any health issues that might impact on your suitability to adopt.

Employment history and references

Your agency will ask for an employment reference and possibly references from previous employers; these are particularly relevant if you have worked with children or vulnerable adults. They will let you know when they are going to do this, so you have a chance to talk to your employer first and let them know of your plans. Your agency will also carry out a financial assessment to make sure you are able to offer a safe and secure placement for any child you are matched with.

Local Authority check

Your agency will check if you have had contact with your local authority in the areas you have lived since the age of 16 years.

Tip: Look on YouTube for anything by Daniel (Dan) Hughes, Sarah Naish, Kim Goulding or Bryan Post.

Personal references

Your friends and family know you best, so your agency will ask for references from them (including any adult children). They will visit some of these referees to ask about the qualities you could bring to being an adoptive parent.

Previous partners

If you have been married before or were in a long-term partnership, your agency will usually contact your former partner to confirm there is no reason why you should not adopt. This may feel intrusive, but it is a normal part of the process. Talk to your social worker if you have any worries and be open with them about your concerns.

Other checks

If you have children already, your agency will ask their health visitor, nursery or school for a reference. They will also complete a Home Health and Safety Check and, where appropriate, a Pet Risk Assessment.

Reading to get you started...

Adopting a child in Scotland by Robert Swift.

The Unofficial Guide to Adoptive Parenting by Sally Donovan.

No Matter What by Sally Donovan.

Big Steps for Little People by Celia Foster.

First steps in parenting the child who hurts – Tiddlers and Toddlers by Caroline Archer.

The great behaviour breakdown by Bryan Post.

Creating Loving Attachments by Kim Golding and Daniel Hughes.

From Fear to Love by Bryan Post.

Plus there are lots of resources about adoption to be found at www.corambaaf.org.uk/books

"At the home visits they really do get to know you well, probably better than you know yourself or anyone else. Some things we talked about were things we ourselves had never discussed. I remember someone at the preparation group asked why the questions and the home study were so in depth. They explained that you would most likely be matched with a child who had been through considerable trauma and that tackling this needed real strength and commitment as a couple. Your relationship would be tested, and you needed to know it was robust enough to cope."

Linda and Keith, adoptive parents to a five-year old girl.



Assessment

Your social worker, home study, references and panel

Home assessment

"The last stage before the panel is a difficult but necessary conversation about who you are prepared to take on. We had a very detailed conversation with our social worker and she asked specifically what we could take on and what we weren't prepared to deal with. You feel like you are rejecting people before you've even met them; another rejection in their lives. But you have to be honest about what you think you're capable of. We had no preference for gender but wanted a child that was under three to fit in with our son; we felt that a younger child was less likely to have had a negative experience and thus bring more challenges to our household."

Mhairi and Derek, parents to Finlay, eight and Elise, one (adopted when she was six months old).

Tip: To get the very best out of the process, be open and honest, and be guided by your social worker. Look at it as free therapy!

When, after preparation, you decide to continue with the adoption process, you will be assigned a link worker. This is a social worker trained in the adoption home assessment process. They will get to know you and your family and, together, you will spend time thinking about what strengths you could bring to adoptive parenting. They will visit you regularly over a few months, with gaps in between to give you time to reflect on what's been discussed or prepare for the next session. This part of the process can take anywhere between six months and a year, fitting round your life and the availability of your social worker. Social workers often give you an outline of what you will be talking about at the next session, so you can think about it in advance and talk to other people. A lot of people find this part of the process particularly difficult, as you'll be asked a lot of extremely personal questions and made to reflect on some uncomfortable areas of your life that you might not want to think about.

The home study will look at:

- Your life experience and motivation to adopt;
- The strengths you bring to adoption, individually and as a couple (if relevant);
- Your childhood, experience of family and views on parenting;
- Your childcare experience or potential;
- Your wider support network – it's difficult to go it alone;
- Your understanding of the needs of adopted children;
- Your financial readiness to adopt.

At the end of the assessment period the agency you are working with will draw all the information you've shared together and put it into a report which is then presented to the Adoption Approval Panel.



Adoption Approval Panel

Your adoption agency's independent Adoption Approval Panel will review the information prepared by your social worker and consider it in detail. The adoption panel is made up of adoption experts and experienced adopters and is independent of the adoption agency. It is their job to make a judgement on your suitability to be an adoptive parent. The panel meet to consider all the evidence presented to them and then make a recommendation back to the agency. You'll attend, along with your social worker, and be there to clarify anything they question about the report. The questions they ask will be along the same lines as the subjects you covered in your home study, so you should feel well prepared. It may be a nerve-wracking experience but always bear in mind that they are deciding on behalf of a child who has already been through loss and trauma – they need to get it right.

You'll usually be told on the same day whether you have been recommended for approval, and if you haven't, the reasons why. There is one final stage before you are 'officially' approved – the agency's decision maker must now decide if they agree with the panel's recommendation and you are suitable to adopt. The decision maker is a nominated person within the adoption agency who has the legal responsibility to make an approval decision. In most circumstances the decision maker accepts the adoption panel's recommendation. You don't need to attend another meeting or panel, but you will be told about their decision. At this stage you will have approval to adopt a child or children in a certain age range and maybe even gender. For instance, you could be approved to adopt a child between three and five, or a sibling group under the age of ten. The next stage is finding a child or children waiting to be adopted who would thrive as part of your family.

Resources

For more information, visit Scotland's Adoption Register or Adoption UK's websites.

"The panel: a big table with lots of people around it - very intimidating. But I'd been prepared by my social worker and she'd been through the sort of questions I'd be asked. After they'd spoken to me I went outside while they made their decision. I was called back in and told I was approved unanimously for a child of either gender between two and five. I cried I was so happy and then everyone else started to cry!"

**Daniela, adoptive Mum
to a four-year old boy.**

Matching

Linking and matching, matching panels, introductions

Matching with a child

By this point of the process, your social worker will have built up a very clear picture of who you are and the child you could bring into your life. If you are approved by a local authority adoption agency your social worker will first look to see if there are children waiting for a family within your agency. Your agency may also belong to a group made up of neighbouring authorities and your social worker will know of children within this group needing adoptive families.

After all the purpose and activity of the previous few months, this can feel like limbo. Things may go quiet for a while as your social worker searches on your behalf. When they do come to you with a possible match, they are likely to have met with the child's social workers and foster carers and done a significant amount of research to see if the match is right for everyone involved. The child they find for you may not be what you expect but keep an open mind: a lot of adopter's comment that their social worker ends up knowing them better than they know themselves by the end of the assessment process.

If a local search does not yield a match, your social worker will widen the search. This is where the Adoption Register comes into play.

Scotland's Adoption Register

Scotland's Adoption Register is a project funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by St Andrew's Children's Society. Its aim is to find the best permanent outcomes for you as a prospective adopter and the children waiting for a new family. The Register provides three main family finding services:

National Online Register

Regulations introduced by the Scottish Government on 1st April 2016 (Scotland's Adoption Register Regulations 2016) require all local authorities and adoption agencies to refer children and adopters to the online register within three months of a child being registered for adoption or, for adopters, within three months of being approved at panel. Two-thirds of matches are made locally. The third of children that reach the register tend to be those with more complex needs or backgrounds.

"I spoke to Julia's foster carers a lot before the panel. They sent me a lot of messages and photographs. I remember seeing her roll about the kitchen floor and a particularly messy one of a beetroot-covered face. Their support meant a lot and I think having a link with the foster carers before a panel is an essential part of the process. It made me feel I was absolutely making the right decision."

**Rebecca, adoptive Mum
to Julia, three and a half.**

The one question that stands out from the matching panel was, 'Will you make a good parent?' Well, at the time I had no idea! My social worker was very supportive and even drove me to the panel herself. I was unanimously approved."

**Grace, adoptive Mum
to five-year old Hope.**

The online register will allow you to view profiles of children waiting for adoption across Scotland. It's best to work through this with your social worker as looking at it alone can be overwhelming. Your social worker will be able to view more detailed profiles and provide extra information on potential matches. The online register will also allow social workers from across Scotland to view your profile (if you choose to upload one) and to get in touch with you and your worker about the child they are seeking a family for.

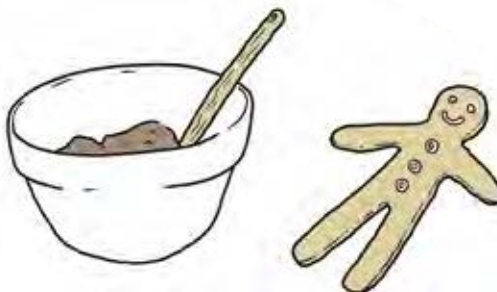
Adoption Exchange Days

Adoption Exchange Days give you the chance to meet social workers, foster carers and agencies from all over Scotland looking to establish links and make matches. You won't meet any children but will get a chance to talk at length to the people involved in looking after them. Profiles, pictures and sometimes videos of children are shared to give you an idea of who they are and what they need from a parent. Other adopters who have been to exchange days say they are a really good way of getting a true sense of a child – more so than viewing a written profile alone.

Adoption Activity Days

Organised around a fun event, with plenty of activities and support, adoption activity days give you a chance to meet children waiting for adoption. Initially activity days were organised for children for whom other family finding methods failed but have now become a part of the matching process for many children. Meeting children 'for real' gives a richer sense of who they are and provides a more reliable basis for starting to explore a match.

Once you've seen details of a child and think that the match could be for you, your social worker will arrange for you to meet important people in the child's life such as their foster carers, social worker, nursery staff, teachers and, where relevant, medical staff. These meetings are a chance to get to know all about your child's life and what caring for them will involve.



Before our daughter, we had a provisional match with another child, and this fell through. We had made the mistake of telling our families about them, so everyone was eager and excited, and when it didn't happen we not only had to contend with our feelings, but had to manage everyone else's. So for our daughter, we never said a thing to anyone until we were actually formally matched with her. And then (when we did tell them) it was a big surprise.

**Jack and Euan, parents
to a one-year old daughter.**

The matching panel was even more nerve-wracking than the original panel, because now we were talking about a real person – our daughter – and we had so much more to lose. I don't remember anything they asked me, only waiting in a small room while they deliberated. They all approved the match, and we went straight into a planning meeting about introductions and worked out when they would happen."

**Linda and Keith, adoptive parents
to a five-year old girl.**

Matching panel

After you've been matched with a child, there is then a formal matching panel. Your assessment report (the big form that tells people all about you and the qualities they think you will bring to being an adoptive parent) and the child's assessment report (their story – about their needs, likes and hopes, sometimes known as a Form E) will be considered and the panel will decide if they want to recommend the match can go ahead. You will be a part of this process and interviewed at panel, much like the adoption panel, but this time about a specific child or children.

Tip: For more information on developments in pre-link meetings, search on www.afascotland.com

Pre-link, or 'bump-in' meetings are a relatively new part of matching and introductions used by a few agencies. These are informal meetings pre-arranged between you and the foster carers, usually in a park or a cafe – a chance to meet your child with no expectations or pressure for anyone.

Introductions

Once your match has been approved, you then have a co-ordination meeting with foster carers, the child's worker and your link worker. It's usually chaired by someone else who's not been part of the adoption up to this point – probably another social worker. Between you, you'll come up with a plan of action to introduce you and the child to each other. You'll take into account the child's routine, your own children and their needs, other foster children who might be part of the picture, and any other factors like holidays or work. Each introduction period will be different and worked out on the basis of you and your child and what will suit everyone best, but the introduction period will be along the lines described in 'The introduction process'.

Bear in mind that agencies are always looking at the best way to make introductions and the process is under constant review. Keep an eye out for any changes or new research to help you through this stage.

Read up on matching and introductions

www.scotlandsadoptionregister.org.uk/family-finding

Rethinking matching in adoptions from care, David Quinton, 2012.

Ten top tips for making matches, Jennifer Cousins, 2011.



The introduction process

Preparation

The child's foster carers and social worker will spend some time preparing them for meeting you. They'll talk about you and anyone else they are going to be living with, show them photographs and answer any questions they might have. You can help by giving the foster carers lots of information and picture of you, your family and your home.

First meetings

These will always be at the foster carers house, where the child is on familiar territory. The first meeting should be low-key, short and not too hands on.

Transfer of care

As each visit progresses, slowly take over the care of the child. Change a nappy to start, read a story, help them with their lunch. Then build up to bath and bedtime, and a story before they go to sleep. You might have a trip out with the child and their foster carers, and then next time a trip out with just you and the child. Always keep talking to the foster carer about what works best for the child.

Rest day

It's important to build a rest day into introductions. This gives you a chance to reflect and review and to ask any questions that might be niggling you. There will be a formal review meeting at this stage to air any concerns and for a general chat on how things are going. This is a highly emotional time, so any time not spent with your child needs to be spent recharging. You might want to keep a journal so you can revisit the experience in years to come, and to help you express how you are feeling.

Home visit

After a gradual build up giving the child time to get to know you, bring them to visit their new home. This can be overwhelming for a child as they try to take in a lot of new information. Keep the visit short and low-key, just like the first time you meet your child.

Moving day

A highly emotional and significant day! We talk about this more on page 36.

"The first meeting went well. Off the back of delays and doubts, I was so relieved she didn't run away and not want to come out. The foster carer was great in preparing her to meet me: she was very excited about meeting this new person. We hit it off really well. It was a short visit to start off with, a gentle introduction."

Grace, adoptive Mum
to five-year old Hope.

"No-one tells you how exhausting introductions are going to be. You are absolutely mentally exhausted by the end of it. Long drives each day, early starts, someone else's house, so you never properly relax. And there's no respite at the end of it as by then you are two full time parents!"

Linda and Keith, adoptive
parents to a five-year old girl.

Legal focus

An insight into key terms you might come across and what they mean

When your child first moves in with you, it will most likely be as a foster child until the adoption order is granted. Emotionally, practically and mentally you are your child's parent, but legally you are his or her foster carer. This means that until Parental Rights and Responsibilities (PRRs) are transferred to you by the Court, there are some things you need to ask permission to do, such as going abroad or changing address.

Amongst the emotion and intensity of adoption, legal matters may pass you by, but it's important to be aware of the legal status of your child at each stage of the process. Your social worker will be on hand to guide and support you every step of the way so do ask them to explain the jargon and what it means for you and your child. It's important to know what is happening with the birth family and whether they are consenting or otherwise to the adoption.

While working to finalise the adoption of your child, it is necessary to secure his or her residence with you, during which time he or she will have the status of a "looked after child". This means that the Local Authority has legal rights and obligations to keep your child's best interests at the centre of their decision making. The following helps to explain ways this can be achieved and to get started, here's an insight into some key legal terms.

Section 25 – Children (Scotland) Act 1995

This applies to a child who is looked after without the need for an Order from the Court or the Children's Hearings, if, for example, the birth parent has consented to their reception into care. Sometimes it is referred to as "voluntary care". If the birth parent agrees to the adoption, the child may be placed with you under Section 25 while plans for adoption are underway. You will have been approved as foster carers to the child. Section 25 provides



relatively little legal security because the birth parents can change their minds and ask for the child to be returned to their care. If the child has been looked after and accommodated by the local authority for more than six months, however, the birth parents are required to give two weeks' notice of their intention and the local authority can take steps to keep the child with you. If your child is already placed with you, the Court can consider whether or not such a move would be reasonable.

Compulsory Supervision Order (CSO) – Children’s Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011

This order is made by the Children’s Hearing where, after considering a child’s circumstances, the Hearing decides that compulsory measures of care are required. In some cases, for example where the plan is for adoption, the CSO will include a decision that the child should not live with the birth parents but instead with specified foster carers—namely, you. The child can only be moved if the Children’s Hearing decides that this should happen. The order may also determine whether there should be contact between the child and birth parents.

CSOs can only last for a year until they need to be looked at again by another Children’s Hearing. They can be reviewed within that year if the child, birth parents or social worker requests this. It may be that the Children’s Hearing makes a decision to deem you to be what is called a Relevant Person if they are satisfied that you have a “significant involvement in the upbringing of the child”. This gives you rights to attend Hearings, receive papers about the Hearings, and ask for reviews and to appeal the Hearings’ decisions.

A CSO provides less security than adoption or a Permanence Order because it can be appealed, reviewed and varied. Where there is a plan for permanence a child will often be subject to a CSO at the point at which they are placed with a prospective adopter. This ensures some certainty while progress is made towards a more permanent legal solution.

Interim Compulsory Supervision Order (ICSO) – Children’s Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011

As the name suggests this is an interim version of the CSO. It can remain in force for up to three weeks until it will be re-considered and continued by a Children’s Hearing or Court and until a CSO can be put in place.



Permanence Order (PO) – Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007

Only the Local Authority can apply for this and when it is granted, they obtain Parental Rights and Responsibilities for the child. Among other things, they can then decide where the child will live and, therefore, can place the child with you as prospective adoptive parents. The PO will have a range of ancillary provisions about who makes decisions about the child, such as what school he or she attends, or whether he or she can travel abroad. These rights can be shared among the Local Authority, you as prospective adopters and the birth parents. The Court may also determine whether contact between the child and birth family should take place.

Permanence Order with authority to Adopt (POA) (sometimes referred to as POAA) Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007

A POA transfers the same rights and responsibilities for the child as the PO does. The birth parents' consent to the authority to adopt must be obtained but the Court can dispense with the need for this consent. Often this will be because the Court is not convinced of the likelihood of the birth parents being able to fulfil their rights and responsibilities for the child. Where a POA has been granted you will still need to petition the Court to adopt the child. You will not need to seek the consent of the birth parents for the adoption to proceed as this will have been dealt with when the POA was granted

Adoption Order – Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007

You may petition the Court directly to adopt your child without a POA first being sought by the Local Authority. You would instruct legal agents to act on your behalf to appear in Court and take care of all the legal requirements. For a child to be adopted he or she needs to be at least 19 weeks old and have been living with you for at least 13 weeks previous to the order being granted. Where the child was not placed with you for adoption the child will have to be at least a year old and have been living with you for at least a year before the order is granted. This would typically be where a child has been living with foster carers who then decide to adopt the child but where they have not been approved as adopters by the Local Authority.

Legal terms and processes can seem daunting, but they serve a purpose. The certainty and security they will give to you as parents is essential.

For more information, advice and support, check out...

www.citizensadvice.co.uk/Scotland

Adoption UK (Scotland)-factsheets on legal matters in Scotland.

www.lawscot.org.uk/find-a-solicitor

This website helps you to select a solicitor who specialises in adoption matters.

Section 3

TWISTS AND TURNS

About the challenges of adoptive parenting from attachment theory and therapeutic approaches to life story work and self-care.

Moving day

The journey begins...

Checklist for moving day

Discuss packing with foster carers a few days before the move (so no-one has to resort to bin liners...)

Remind the child that they are saying 'see you later' to their foster carers rather than 'goodbye'.

The day your child finally moves to live with you can be a very emotional day – happy but also exhausting. You'll probably be quite tired after the intensity of the introduction period and approaching the day with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. The foster carers, while happy to see the child they have loved and cared for all this time finally moving to their new home, may also be dreading losing them and facing the empty space in their home and their lives. Keep other children who are not moving in mind, whether that is other children in placement, the foster carers' birth children or other children in your family. They are all experiencing change or loss and will need support.

Everyone involved should be clear about the arrangements for the day, particularly whether you will be collecting the child, or the foster carers will be bringing them to you. Make sure timings fit in with the child's routine and you are not trying to move them when they are hungry and tired. The child should be told exactly what is happening and when.

After the move, children who have been maltreated may revert to using the survival tactics which worked best for them in their birth family or when faced with previous moves. Remember that changes in behaviour may be due to grief and a reaction to the move rather than anything you are doing. While you should be prepared for difficult or clingy behaviour, more often children in this situation feel powerless and try to please adults. They may not seem at all upset and appear happy to fit in with any plans. It is important that they get explicit permission from the adults around them to be sad and to be able to voice feelings about missing their foster family, friends, pets and familiar surroundings. Although they may be calling you "Mum" and "Dad" you will still be a relatively unknown quantity to them. Giving children support to grieve in these circumstances is a way of letting them know that they are safe and valued in their new family and will help them form an attachment to you.

Make time to look after yourself and not take on too much in the first few days after the move. It might be tempting to try to organise lots of fun things to do but remember that you will be in the early stages of getting to know one another and it is important that other things are made as easy as possible. Try not to overwhelm the child with too many visitors – people wanting to help could perhaps show their support in other ways such as making food or doing shopping. However, visits from a few close friends or family members can help



support you and provide some variety and a break from the intensity in these early days. You should have lots of information about your child's routine and likes and dislikes: while it is a good idea not to introduce major changes at the beginning, it is also important that you have some flexibility if needed. Make sure you follow through with whatever plans have been made for the child to see their foster carer again so that they know they have not been abandoned. Phone calls and Facetime can also help if distance is a factor.

Be prepared not to feel instant love for your child – this can take time. Talk this through with someone who can help put your feelings in perspective. Your social worker will have come across this before and will not be shocked. And always remember to be kind to yourself and not expect too much during this time – it is a huge change for everybody, but it is also the start of your family life together.

"The first few days? Terrible. He was crying all the time. The advice from the social worker was to build the bond between us and for it to be just the two of us. But it was hard. I felt that I couldn't do anything, and nothing worked. I wished I had someone there for me - not for him, for me. I called my family and friends, but I was alone. I worried about how to make him feel at home. But things improved quickly. I did everything I could with him - dancing, singing, playing. The house was a mess and there was a lot of chocolate involved, but we got there."

Daniela, adoptive Mum to a three-year old boy.

"When she moved in we called the foster carer daily for the first two weeks. She couldn't cope with uncertainty and if she didn't want to do things she threw things at me. She didn't quite understand what adoption meant to start with - she thought she had done something wrong at her foster carers and that was why she had moved. When really [her foster care placement] had been a great placement, a really positive experience."

Grace, adoptive Mum to a five-year old girl.

On the day we actually took our daughter home to live with us permanently, my partner got a flat tyre in the car. We had to pull over and wait for his brother to come and collect us. We had this screaming child in the car who obviously didn't understand what was going on. I think we both looked terrified and passers-by must have thought two strange guys were stealing a child! We were under strict instructions to keep family away for a period of time to let her settle, and here she was within an hour sitting in the back of uncle's car smiling away on her first day.

Jack and Euan, parents to a one-year old daughter.



Allow your child to grieve

While this is an exciting and joyful time, it is also one of grief for your child. They have left behind significant people, places and things to start their new life. And don't judge who is significant to them – it could be anyone from a teacher to a lollipop lady they used to see every day.

Getting to know you

The early days of family life – what to expect and tips for the first few weeks

"Going from zero to two children overnight? As much as I knew it would be a change, the reality was sometimes different from my rose-tinted idea of being parents. There were ups and downs. Sometimes the children struggled with the changes and sometimes it was the adults struggling. Looking back on it now, there were precious memories and moments being created for us all. It couldn't be that bad, as we went on to adopt a third".

**Lisa and Grant –
adoptive parents to three.**

"Julia settled quickly. I think by Monday she was settled and not crying or looking around for her foster carers. I'd given up work a week or so before the transition and it had felt like a long wait. But as soon as she was here, I felt that this was now my role and that things were complete."

**Rebecca, adoptive Mum
to Julia, three-and-a-half.**

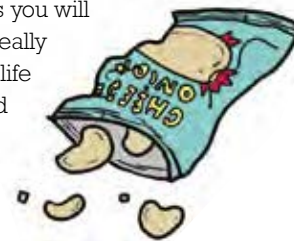
After all the stresses and strains, the adoption 'process' culminates in a little whirlwind turning your whole life upside down. The early days can be joyous, chaotic, an emotional roller coaster, memory building and exhausting. And that is day one.

To be able to enjoy this time with your child, then it is good to have some flexible plans in place. It's good to keep certain routines your child has followed in their foster care home, whilst also adding your own structure and plans.

Try to keep the early days as low key, quiet and boring as possible. To help you keep a structure you can plan activities prior to child's arrival. Activities such as walks to the park, playing in the garden and spending time making things together – baking, crafts, drawing and painting – can all be good ways of learning what your child's likes and dislikes are. This is the time that you and your child get to know each other, so take it really slowly and allow yourself to find out about each other's little ways and habits.

Don't feel frightened of rejection in these early days. Your child is not doing this to hurt you, but is coming from a place of fear, worry and uncertainty of what is happening to them. Your child might also be grieving for the significant people, places and things they have left or reliving past experiences of rejection which could trigger certain behaviours.

Your social worker is likely to advise that you spend the first few months of life as a family as closely knit as possible: "funneling" is the technical term, and in practice it may mean you are not encouraged to introduce any of your family or friends to your child until they have had a chance to build an attachment with you. Ideally, only you (or your partner), as the identified attachment figures, should feed them, change them, bathe them, comfort them when they hurt or fulfil any of their myriad other needs. It will be quite natural to want to share this experience with family and friends, as you will undoubtedly be as proud as any new parent, but this is a really important formative time for a child. You'll probably make life easier in the long-term if you keep everything low-key and focused on just them and you for the early days.



Funnelling doesn't necessarily mean you have to stay in the house all day: you must do whatever suits your new family unit. Trips to the park when it's quiet, short walks, quick plays in the garden are all great for building up family time together. Equally, where the very idea of getting organised and going out seems like too much, home based activities are just as effective. The important thing is to follow the needs of your children.

It can be difficult for your family and friends to appreciate how important funnelling is in the early days. They are likely to have shared so many moments of your adoption journey up to now and want to share what is really the best bit – getting to know a child. However, the best way they can help and support you at this time is through practical tasks. This could mean anything from preparing your home for the child and cooking ahead to helping you with shopping or housework.

In much the same way as your child's foster carers introduced you into their lives, you can, in turn, introduce your family and friends to your child gradually by showing them photos or encouraging them to call or Facetime them. This means when they do meet grandparents, aunts and friends, they are already familiar with them without the overwhelming and potentially frightening or confusing experience of meeting many new adults at once.

If you are a single adopter, you might want to introduce a couple of key people before your child moves in, familiarising them with pictures and information throughout the introduction stage of the process. This way the child already knows who will be in the household from the early days, and you will not feel so isolated.

No matter how intense and exhausting this stage is, don't push family and friends away. Make time for a call in the evening or invite them around for a quick catch up when your child is in bed. Also remember to involve the child's foster carers where you can – you can call them if you are unsure about the way your child is behaving or communicating with you.

Most importantly, remember these are the early days of a lifelong process, and you are building up a future together. It doesn't need to be perfect all the time; family life rarely is.

"Reality soon hit home though. After being with me for two weeks and having lots of fun she realised the 'holiday' wasn't going to end and she wasn't going back 'home'. Things were hard work and really up and down."

Grace, adoptive Mum to a five-year old girl.

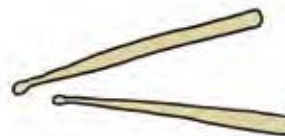
Quick tips:

- Be flexible.
- Make time for self-care.
- Have fun movements.
- Slowly build up physical contact, affection and cuddles.
- Reassure your child that you will keep them safe.

"The first few days, weeks even, we kept it really close, but when we started going out and about and bumping into people, we felt it was time to start introducing her to the people that are important to us. There were a couple of times we didn't get it right - such as when I got out of the car to fetch something and my brother-in-law got in. To us it was just family, to her it was a strange man. She didn't like men much."

Linda and Keith, adoptive parents to a five-year old girl.

We are more than the sum of our parts



Some common challenges of adoptive parenting – and why they are only part of the story

Throughout the preparation process, you will talk a lot about all the possible conditions, disabilities and behavioural issues an adopted child might have. This can seem incredibly daunting but is a key part of preparing you for the realities of adoptive parenting. No adoptive child, no matter their background, will come to you without issues. However, knowing what to expect, where to go for help and information, and that you can work on whatever issues they come with, is a good starting place.

Some individuals, on paper, can seem like too much of a challenge – too ‘damaged’ – but importantly, the list of conditions is only a part of their story. We are all more than the sum of our parts, as we hope these stories demonstrate.

Rosie’s story on paper...

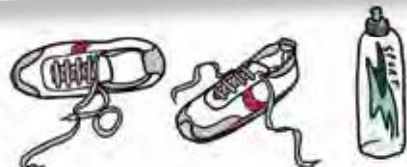
During pregnancy Rosie’s mum took a large variety of drugs: heroin, marijuana, cocaine and valium. She also had a bad accident, breaking several bones, then spent a long period in hospital. After she was born Rosie was placed in the special baby’s unit where she withdrew from all of the drugs that were in her tiny body. She went to live with foster carers at the age of two weeks. When the decision was made for Rosie to be adopted, social workers involved with her case considered her to be very hard to place. They struggled to find a prospective match. Her foster carers made the decision to adopt her. Rosie is hypervigilant and can be anxious about certain things. She is very close to her Mum and Dad.



The person in real life...

Rosie is a bright and clever 12-year-old who has just moved into her first year at secondary school. She is doing exceptionally well at school. She is very active, enjoying gymnastics, running and dancing. Rosie is a member of her school choir and attends Scouts. She has a large group of pals and enjoys regular sleepovers with her close friends.

Rosie describes herself as, “Ambitious, honest bold and nice”, and her parents as “fantastically wonderful!” (This might have been said in the sarcastic tones of a teenager).



Evan's story on paper...

Before Evan was born the decision was made that he would not be going home with his birth mother. She was both HIV and HepC positive and took anti-retro virus drugs throughout her pregnancy. She was also on a methadone programme and using a mixture of prescribed, un-prescribed and recreational drugs. She was arrested several times and was under the influence of alcohol. His adoption papers noted he may suffer from the affects of his mother's pre-natal drinking.

Evan went to live with his parents at the age of ten months, with his half siblings. His development has always been delayed – his language and motor functions all behind age appropriate expectations, and he presents as a very hyperactive child who can struggle to follow direction and has real difficulties with his impulsive behaviour. At the age of five he received a formal diagnosis of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

The person in real life...

Evan is cheeky, loving and full of life. He is extremely active, and full of energy, but loves to play games, particularly those involving water! He enjoys building things and outdoor play. He is very sensitive and caring of the family pets and loves to chat about his dogs and chickens. Described by his sister as: "Always noisy – but in a way that means he's always there. I don't like when he's not around, when I don't hear the noise it means he's not there, and I miss him." Described by his mum as: "A loving and caring little boy, who is developing his own witty personality. He has an eagerness for life and loves to explore and learn by doing. He sometimes struggles to stay focused and on task, and can be impulsive leading to some interesting outcomes. Life is never dull with Evan around, and we wouldn't change our decision to have him as part of our family." Evan about his parents: "Mummy and Daddy are great and I love them".

Charlie's story on paper...

Charlie was removed from his birth family at three and a half and placed in a foster family with one birth sibling and three other foster children. He suffered neglect and mistreatment with his birth family, including violent and dangerous behaviour from an older birth sibling within the family home. He was adopted by his parents when he was nearly six years old.

Charlie had significant difficulties at school, presenting as hypervigilant, hyperactive and hypermobile. He was fearful of loud noises and frequently locked and barricaded himself inside the teacher's cupboard. He suffered numerous exclusions from school, in primary school alone. He was diagnosed as having ADHD at the age of 12 and found support in his high school with a guidance teacher who sought help for his dyslexia.

The person in real life...

Now 20, Charlie is loving, fun and funny. He enjoys dancing, singing and music, playing the drums, guitar, bass, piano and keyboard. His parents are very musical and though he thinks he was before he met them, he is so glad they share the same interests and hobbies as him. He studied theatre technology at college while living independently for a year. He then returned home to start his own business in sound hire and support. Charlie describes himself as, "Energetic – 'mental'! Now seeing the younger kids at family events – I realise that was me, wild!" and his Mum and Dad as, "Kind, caring, loving supportive – of certain things! It was a good match – we have matching hobbies and interests. I've always loved singing and dancing. My sister asked for a mum and a dad and a cat – and that's what we got! I don't remember what I asked for, but I'm happy with the family I have."

What does all this mean?

You will no doubt come across terms you have never encountered before when learning about adoptive parenting. Here's a list of the words used to describe some of the most common difficulties experienced by children – along with information about where you can find more about what the condition means, its implications for development, and how you can support and help your child as they grow.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

FASD is an umbrella term for the preventable birth defects of the brain and body caused by pre-natal exposure to alcohol. The diagnoses that fall under this term are Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), Partial Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (PFAS), Alcohol-related Neuro-developmental Disorder (ARND) and Alcohol-related Birth Defects (ARBD). As a foetus does not have a fully developed liver it cannot filter out toxins passed on by its mother. Instead, alcohol circulates in the blood system, killing brain cells and damaging the nervous system. The extent and frequency of the mother's drinking will determine how widespread the damage is, and which areas are affected.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are stressful or traumatic events that children and young people were exposed to at an early age. They range from experiences that directly harm a child, such as physical, verbal or sexual abuse, and physical or emotional neglect, to those that affect the environments in which children grow up, such as parental separation, domestic violence, mental illness, alcohol abuse, drug use or imprisonment. The experiences harm children's developing brains and change how they respond to stress. Sometimes their immune systems are so profoundly damaged that the effects show up decades later.

Attachment Disorders

Right from the beginning of our lives, as babies, we seek attachment. When care givers respond to the needs of a child, they form secure attachments. Every child needs to feel loved and secure to develop normally. Children who don't form secure attachments when they are little are more likely to have development gaps and delays and to struggle more with relationships and behaviour.



Trauma, Neglect and Abuse

Sadly, these terms are common in the background stories of adopted children. You will discuss at length what each of these mean and the affect each has on a child's development and behaviour.

Trauma If a baby is not cared for properly and its needs are unmet, it will form insecure or disorganised attachments. The baby will not develop the ability to regulate stress and their brain development will be compromised. This is developmental trauma. Some children do develop the ability to regulate stress but then, at a stage when they are able to process their feelings, they are exposed to terrifying events. Overwhelming fear or horror leads to extreme stress and the body is flooded with massive amounts of stress hormones, causing major areas of the brain to shut down. This is emotional trauma.

Neglect A neglected child may have experienced a lack of food, adequate clothing, sleep, routine, personal hygiene, intellectual stimulation, medical attention, protection and emotional response.

Abuse This can be emotional (scapegoated, deprived of physical affection, belittled and humiliated, repeatedly moved from significant relationships, overprotected, racially abused or denigrated because of a disability), physical (shaken, beaten, burned, bitten or have had bones broken) or sexual (anything from inappropriate touching and exposure to pornography to full sexual penetration or sexual exploitation).

More information:

nofas-uk.org

fasdnetwork.org

knowledge.scot.nhs.uk (search for FASD pathway)

gov.scot/publications/adverse-childhood-experiences

We know that this is only a brief summary of the terminology used to describe possible conditions your child may have. You will have the opportunity to learn about these and other issues in much more detail during the preparation process.

We recommend reading as much as possible about each area and hope the links above will send you in the right direction.

I am here and so are you

Attachment theory and therapeutic parenting

The ability to form healthy attachments is vital for a child's physical, emotional, social and intellectual development. When babies are born, they rely on parents or caregivers to protect them, care for them and look after both their emotional and physical needs. Having these needs met allows them to form a bond with their parents, or 'attach'. Forming this attachment helps children learn to love and trust others, to regulate emotions, become aware of others' feelings and develop healthy bonds in the future. If for some reason this bond isn't formed, children can develop attachment issues. It may be that the child felt abandoned, isolated or uncared for during their early years. The reasons behind such experiences can be complex, but for a young child all they understand is that they cannot depend on others.

All adopted children will, to some extent, be affected by their early childhood experiences. They may also be affected by pre-birth experiences such as maternal substance abuse, poor nutrition, maternal depression, or violence. Even children adopted in the early months of life can develop insecure and unhealthy attachment patterns due to their earliest experiences. These experiences and the absence of secure and healthy attachment lead to developmental gaps and delays, frequently associated with difficult behaviours.



As an adoptive parent, you may find yourself struggling with difficult and puzzling behaviours. You might expect that given time, love and patience, your child will respond and make healthy attachments. But the unhealthy patterns of attachment and the effects of trauma are laid down in infancy and 'hardwired' into the brain. However, it is possible to repair and 'rewire' your child's pattern of attachment and behavioural response. The first step is to understand the cause of your child's difficulties, including the impact of abuse and neglect. The next step is to learn different parenting strategies to help your child develop new and healthier responses. For most adopted children, traditional parenting methods – such as 'time out', reward charts or old-fashioned punitive discipline – are not appropriate and do not help towards creating a secure and loving attachment.

Traumatised children need 'therapeutic re-parenting'; a phrase you are likely to come across a lot in preparation. Therapeutic re-parenting is a consistent and highly nurturing approach, designed to repair the broken bonds of early attachment and develop new, loving attachments between you and your child. It's a fine balance between loving nurture and respectful boundaries, valuing structure, repetition and routine. Done consistently, it can help to heal children who have suffered very difficult early experiences.

What is PLACE?

Dan Hughes' PLACE model is an example of therapeutic re-parenting and describes how we can respond to children in a way that is loving, accepting, non-threatening and encourages relationship-building. PLACE is an approach to parenting that offers secure boundaries, while focusing on keeping the child close – doing things together, not separately, and having 'time in' rather than 'time out'.

Playful Keep things fun – a quick hug when they are not expecting one or a victory dance when they tidy their room.

Loving Show your child love even when they misbehave. If you lose your temper (and you are only human, we all do it), reconnect very quickly.

Accepting Praise your child for who they are, not what they achieve.

Curious Wonder aloud why your child is acting in a certain way – it gives them a chance to think about their actions and is usually more effective than asking them a direct question.

Empathic Put yourself in your child's shoes – allow them to feel their feelings, not suppress them.



You might think that therapeutic parenting sounds woolly, or too soft. It goes against cultural 'norms' and the parenting styles that you might have learned or inherited from your parents. As a society, we tend to have an expectation that, most of the time, children will do as they are told; that they will follow our instructions and behave appropriately in public. When this does not happen, we can become judgmental and punitive, raising voices and resorting to anger and shaming, to coerce the child into 'behaving' in order to teach them 'right from wrong'. But have you ever noticed that this punitive, shaming approach doesn't really work, even with securely attached children? It is counter-productive and simply makes them defensive, ashamed or defiant – all feelings which tend to block the desired effect of learning from experience.

Parenting therapeutically (with an approach like PLACE) does not mean tolerating or allowing your child to get away with challenging behaviour, but it does mean being clear about the boundaries in a calm, loving and empathetic manner, demonstrating acceptance and understanding of the child's difficulties arising from their early traumatic experiences.

Parents can also find it difficult to parent therapeutically when faced with the judgement and ignorance of other parents, teachers, family and friends. People around you may feel that you are being too soft on your child, that you are not exerting enough 'control' and that the child 'just needs some discipline'. Their overwhelming (and extremely irritating!) need to express these opinions can make life very tough for you as a parent, particularly when you are trying so hard to be the safety net for your child and to give them secure boundaries, whilst acknowledging that they are frightened, overwhelmed and hurting.



As adoptive parents, we need to remember that behaviour is a form of communication. Children may not be able to verbalise their fears and emotions – they probably won't even recognise or understand them – so all of these 'big feelings' can manifest in a variety of challenging and disturbing ways.

Some points to remember:

- The early experiences in your child's life can't be erased, but further damage can be prevented by practising therapeutic re-parenting.
- Nobody 'gets it right' 100% of the time. There will often be times when you feel you could have done better – and occasions when you feel that you have failed them completely. This is normal – you need to make it OK to fail sometimes! As long as you are genuinely doing the best you can, most of the time, your child will benefit enormously.
- Keep in mind that, although your role as an adoptive parent is hard work and can present unique challenges at times, it is hugely rewarding and you really will be transforming the lives and futures of some of our most vulnerable children.



What next?

- *Attaching in Adoption*, Deborah Gray: Perspectives Press, 2002.
- *Attachment Trauma and Resilience*, Kate Cairns: BAAF, 2002.
- *Building the Bonds of Attachment*, Daniel Hughes: Jason Aronson, 2006.
- *Facilitating Developmental Attachment*, Daniel Hughes: Jason Aronson, 2004.
- *The A-Z of Therapeutic Parenting, strategies and solutions*, Sarah Naish: Jessica Kingsley, 2018.
- *Attachment Handbook for Foster Care and Adoption*, Gillian Schofield and Mary Beek: CoramBAAF, revised edition 2018.
- *The Primal Wound*, Nancy Newton Verrier: Gateway Press, 2009.
- *New Families, Old Scripts*, Caroline Archer & Christine Gordon: Jessica Kingsley.
- *Trauma & Attachment: Causing Havoc CD* Gudron Dalibor Adoption UK 2010.
- AUK's 'The Wall' is a graphic illustration of how unmet physical and emotional needs early in life affect children's later development, requiring different parenting techniques and support for adoptive parents. www.adoptionuk.org/different-kind-parenting/wall
- *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook – What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing* by Dr Bruce Perry.
- *The Great Behaviour Breakdown* by Bryan Post.
- *Therapeutic Parenting in a Nutshell: Positives and Pitfalls* by Sarah Naish.

Adoption UK: www.adoptionuk.org/scotland

Help!

Adoption support: how it works and what you're entitled to

When you adopt, you will get support. Not only from family and friends, and your social work team, but also formal support. The Adoption Support Services (Scotland) Regulations 2009 outline that all local authorities across Scotland need to make provision for support services available to everyone affected by adoption – this includes adopted children and adults, birth families and adoptive families.

While the legislation gives a framework for support, each adoption agency will interpret it differently, so levels of support will vary. It's best to check out what your agency offers – all agencies must publish details of their adoption allowances scheme. Allowances may be given for a variety of reasons, such as a child needing special care or resources because of illness, disability, emotional or behavioural issues; an agency needing to make special arrangements to facilitate the placement because of the age or ethnic origin of the child or so that they can be placed with a sibling or with a child they previously shared a home with; help with legal or travel costs; support in preparing a home for a child; income support for a parent who gives up work to look after an adopted child.

How you use any adoption support allowances is up to you. Financial help is intended to support the needs of the child you have adopted. You may choose, for example, to use it to fund family activities or to allow you to work less hours. Each family and their needs will be different and there are no restrictions attached to funding.

The agency that places the child is responsible for supporting you as an adoptive family for the first three years you are together. After that it is the local authority you live in that takes responsibility for supporting you. If you do receive adoption allowances, they will continue to be paid by the placing authority. The exception to this is if you use a voluntary agency for your adoption: in this case they will provide on-going support.

It's worth remembering too that for most children you will legally be their foster carer for the first few months before you can apply for an adoption order. Your adoption training, assessment and approval is likely to have covered what fostering will involve and your agency will clarify whether a fostering allowance will be available for the care of your child.

Tip: You should have an Adoption Support Plan in place right from the start – it's something that you should be discussing after your matching panel.

If there is nothing in place, push for a discussion about it and get something in writing. Your child may not need help at this stage, but it is important to keep the door open.

Statutory adoption leave and pay

You will be entitled to statutory adoption leave and pay, but just like maternity pay, your employer may offer more than the standard allowance. Talk to them about what they offer. The only exception to this is if you are self-employed, in which case you are not entitled to any statutory pay.

More information:

Most support you receive will be from your agency or local authority, but there are also voluntary organisations who may be able to offer you additional support.

Adoption UK Scotland:

www.adoptionuk.org/Scotland

AFA Scotland:

www.afascotland.org.uk

Adoption UK and AFA Scotland have produced a national map of support services – search on either site to find out more.

Scotland Adoption Support Service (SASS):

www.barnardos.org.uk/fosteringandadoption/adoption/adoption-in-scotland/scottish_adoption_support_service



Telling stories

Life story work and its importance in shaping identity

We all need to know where we come from to know who we are now. Gone are the days when adoption meant a new start, a clean slate, a forgotten past. A child will come to you with a history, one they will carry with them even as they move forward in a new chapter of their lives, a history you will come to share with them. As adoptive parents, you will play a vital part in respecting, exploring and explaining their story and how it brought them to you. Remember though that you should not be doing this alone, but with the support of your social work team: some stories are best explored by people who are not part of the family.

Most life story work follows a similar structure of present – past – present – future. It should always be grounded in the secure life the child has with you now before you explore the past together, then finished with a look forward at how the future will unfold, with a reassuring and permanent presence behind them. Sometimes your child will start a conversation with a question, sometimes it will feel appropriate for you to talk about their earlier life: days such as Mother's Day are likely to prompt discussion.

Speaking to your child about their past can be extremely challenging as an adoptive parent if the child has experienced abuse, neglect and harm in the care of their birth family. Trying to reconcile feelings of anger, hurt and upset on your child's behalf, whilst trying to be neutral and factual with your child about their history is a bit of a tricky tight rope walk. None of us want to remind our children of unhappy memories or prompt them to revisit difficult times but talking about ideas and feelings associated with these events is an essential part of helping a child to process these experiences.

At the heart of all this is a child who may be confused and baffled about what adoption actually means. They may be internally processing their identity and their place in the world. A child can make up all sorts of misinformation and provide their own magical narrative, so it is your role as an adoptive parent to be able to contain their worries and concerns whilst giving a factual reflection of their history before they lived with you. Children also need to be reassured that although their birth family form part of who they are, they do not define how they will turn out as a person.

For you, holding the knowledge that your child has a biological connection with another individual can be an unsettling thought – so much so, that for some adoptive parents it can be easier to try and forget their child has a previous family. But as complex as it is, your child has another family and they are part of their identity. You will be the guardian of their future, but also the keeper and sharer of your child's past.

Did you know?

Up to the age of 7, children believe that their own thoughts and actions cause things to happen

to the people around them. They are naturally egocentric and can't understand the world any other way.

"It's my fault Dad hit Mum, he was angry because I wouldn't behave before that."

Children need help to understand that they are not the cause of what is happening to them and should not blame themselves for it.

Jane Steele, AFA Scotland.

Telling difficult stories

Practice Think through what you are going to say, the words you are going to use and the way you'll say it. Read up on the best way to explain things. Write a script if it helps.

Share Rehearse with someone else. Get them to listen to the story you plan to tell and ask questions as if they were your child. This might prepare you for some unexpected curiosity.

Be honest Stick to the facts. Don't try to gloss over difficult information or use vague euphemisms but find an age-appropriate way to tell your child their real story. If you don't give them a complete picture, they might fill in the gaps themselves and they'll find it hard to adjust when they do know the truth. Some children create a fantasy narrative about their 'other' life – the life they would have led if you had not 'taken them away'. They need to know the truth, but in an age-appropriate way.

Reserve judgement Your child's story may be one of neglect, abuse or trauma. You will have every right to feel sad and angry on your child's behalf. But your role is to help them process these painful memories, so you must try and keep your feelings or judgement out of the picture. No matter what has happened, children will carry love and loyalty for their birth family, and you don't want them to feel they cannot express these emotions, nor that they are letting you down for doing so.

Acknowledge gaps Sometimes you simply won't know the answers to your child's questions. Whilst your social worker will have told you as much as they know, they themselves don't always have the whole picture. They have to rely on the narrative of the birth parents, who may sometimes be reluctant to disclose all the details of their lives. If you don't know an answer to a child's question, be honest with them rather than trying to guess or create a story. Tell them you will try to find out more.

Your child's story

Your social worker is responsible for gathering together any material related to your child's past and for managing life story work. It is something you should tackle in partnership. When your child joins your family, they should bring with them the stories of their past. These are likely to be in the form of:

A life story book – giving information about where they were born, their birth parents, other members of the family, time spent at foster families and what experiences they had there, what they like, the places they have been and anecdotes or funny stories. It should be a resource you can add to or change as your child gets older, growing and expanding with them as they become old enough to learn more about their earlier life.

A memory box – containing anything from when they were babies such as scan pictures, hospital tags, first baby-gro, and any important items from their time in foster care.

A later life letter – this is a letter usually written by the child's social worker that you can save for when your child is older and ready to read the full details of their story.

All of these are key tools in life story work. They are useful to prompt conversations and create opportunities for your child to ask questions.

Formal records – you should get all your child's medical information and their red book. When your child is 16 they will be able to read through all their adoption records. If they have been well prepared through life story work there should be no surprises, although the information may be more detailed and adult than they have previously encountered.

What next? Further reading and information:

*Life Work with children who are fostered or adopted
Using diverse techniques.*

Joy Rees.

*Life story books for adopted and fostered children
A family friendly approach.*

Joy Rees.

*The new life work model
Practice guide.*

Edith Nicholls.

*Life story work
Why, what, how and when.*
Tony Ryan and Rodger Walker.

My life and me.
Jean Camis.

A template for children to record details of their life and experiences.

www.lifestoryworks.org

A really useful resource written by an adopter and a social worker together, which has a great section on how to tell difficult stories.

Life story work can be forgotten as everyday life takes over, so try to fill in any gaps in your child's history as soon as possible after they have joined you so it's there when you need it.

People move on and records are closed, so the sooner you start, the more likely you are to have an accurate picture.

Health visitors can access details of your child's birth; if your child is young enough to still have a health visitor, they can be a valuable source of information.



The Adoption Triangle

You, your child and their birth family – managing contact and expectations



As you go through the adoption process, one of the issues that you might be concerned about is the birth family relationship and all that it entails. This intertwined relationship can sometimes be referred to as the Adoption Triangle, or Triad.

The triangle captures the idea that adoption creates a life-long relationship between three parties. For the adopted person, making sense of these different relationships is at the heart of how they develop a positive sense of their own identity. The approach you take as an adoptive parent will be crucial in helping them develop a sense of who they are that recognises the importance of the birth family, whilst reassuring them of their secure place in your family. Some level of continuing contact with members of the birth family may be part of this, but whatever the practical arrangements, the most important thing is the approach you bring. You may hear people speak about 'communicative openness': another way of saying that you appreciate how important your child's birth family is and they can talk openly about them.



Of course, finding a way of making this three-way relationship work can be difficult for everyone involved. No matter what your child has gained from being a part of your life, adoption from their perspective will always have a loss attached to it; the loss of their birth family and the life-long impact it will have on them.

For the birth family there is the loss of a child born into their family, yet legally severed from and no longer living in the family group. For you as an adoptive parent, there is the sometimes-uneasy relationship you will need to have with the birth family of a child who will become your own.

Contact between a child and their birth family (and others who have been important in their lives) will always be considered when a child is placed for adoption. What is right for each individual varies and a contact plan is made for every child. The child's needs are central to any plan, but it will always consider your views. You might be given

the option of meeting the birth parents before your child comes to live with you. Although a very emotional experience, it can be useful to know who you are writing to in the future. It may also alter the picture you have unavoidably built up of them in your mind.

Direct (face-to-face) contact between a child and their birth parents is becoming more common but remains unusual. In most cases where contact is agreed, it is most likely to be via indirect 'letterbox' contact, where an exchange of written information between you and the birth family is handled through a central point (usually the adoption service acting as the letterbox exchange.) In this way, support can be provided to everyone involved to help make this work well for the child and possible concerns, such as keeping addresses confidential or looking out for inappropriate content, can be managed. You'll usually be asked to send letters and photographs to the birth family on at least an annual basis. A letter might include, for example, milestones a child has achieved during the year, their physical health and progress at school. Social workers encourage birth families to reply to adopters to keep them informed of birth family events. Whilst maintaining contact with a family your child can no longer live with may be challenging for all sorts of reasons, always keep at heart that you are doing this with the best interests of your child in mind.

While face-to-face meetings with birth parents are rare, they can be one way to ensure that brothers and sisters stay in touch. Research has shown that sibling relationships are important for children who have experienced life in care, helping with the development of their identity and understanding of their family history. Swapping information with birth siblings can be a helpful way to support these needs and can make a valuable contribution to life story work with your adopted child.

Research also suggests that decisions about the frequency, location and support available for these meetings needs to be decided on a child-by-child basis. Above all, attention needs to be paid to the quality of such contact arrangements. It is important that meetings feel safe and supported as well as natural and 'family-like'.

Often children adopted from care experience a number of family and placement moves. During these periods children who are not biologically-related brothers and sisters, such as other children in the foster family, may become important. From the child's perspective, these relationships have the quality of a sibling relationship, so it is important that these significant relationships are recognised and supported as well.



What about birth parents?

Most birth parents have a basic need to know if their child who was adopted is alive and well. Although adoptions today aim to be more open and include some form of contact with birth family this is not always possible. For birth parents and relatives they can often wonder what has happened to their child; Are they thriving? Are they happy? Do they take after me? They might even ask – if they haven't had a happy adoption how can organisations support this?

When reunions do happen, often there is a sense of guilt on the birth family side that they were unable to give their child what they needed. This goes hand in hand with a sense of fear that the adopted person will be angry or upset with them for the reasons behind their adoption.

Most birth parents will feel loss and grief for their child which they cannot always articulate or understand and with this comes a desire to know where their child is. As they are not allowed to know the adopted person's new identity, they often go to organisations such as Birthlink to register their details on the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland.

The multi-layered nature of adoption is never an easy road to navigate, even more so in the contemporary times of adoption, where individuals can be found so easily via social media. If as a parent you can be open and honest with your child about their adoption, this gives them permission to talk to you about aspects that may worry them. (See our insight into Life Story work on pages 49-51). It also keeps communication open for the future, when your child may want to explore contact with their birth family. To have you alongside them as they take this difficult and challenging journey helps keeps a connection with your child. The desire your child may feel to seek out their family of origin should not be seen as a rejection of the love and care you have given to them, but more as another part of the adoption journey that you can travel together.

More information:

Birthlink – for adults affected by adoption (birth family, adoptees, adopters)
www.birthlink.org.uk

Adoption Contact Register for Scotland – advice, information and a means of reconnection in a sensitive and confidential way: the charity link people with a mutual desire to be in touch with one another.

Siblings Reunited (STAR) – support positive contact arrangements in a child-friendly environment www.siblingsreunited.co.uk

Stand up for Siblings – give more information about the needs of siblings in care www.standupforsiblings.co.uk

Teach the teacher

Why adopted children need special consideration in school and how to talk to teaching staff about their needs

What was your experience of school? Did you enjoy it? Some of us have good memories of our school days – the friends we made, the teachers who we got on with, maybe even the school dinners! As adults, we might have visited some local schools and been impressed by the displays on the walls of the class rooms and the school's firm behaviour management policy.

Children who have suffered trauma in their early years may view school from a very different perspective: their experiences may have led them to view adults with suspicion, fear or mistrust. School contains many adults in positions of power over children and lots of other children (competitors for food and attention). They are very busy places – a great deal to look at, many changes of activity throughout the day, and lots of different people. All this is very demanding for a hyper vigilant child who has learned that the way to keep safe is to keep tabs on everything.

Some adopted children take school in their stride, others find it a very difficult place to be. For those that find it challenging, it is often only through their behaviour that they can communicate their distress: whether that is wandering round the classroom constantly checking, hiding under the table or running away when it all gets too much. Adoption UK's 2018 survey¹ on wellbeing at school revealed that over 70% of adopted children in Scotland felt confused and worried at school and felt that other children enjoyed it more than they did. It's so important that we understand this as parents and that teachers get it too.

It's also important that teachers know that your child is adopted. It's not something to be ashamed of. You don't need to give lots of details, just enough so that they understand why some things might be more difficult or disturbing for your child. Discuss with your child how they might answer questions or deal with situations that come up. Other children might not understand what adoption means – young people report being asked if they grew up in an orphanage and where their 'real' parents were. It is useful to know when certain topics are coming up – family trees, bring a picture of yourself as a baby, police coming in for a road safety talk. Two-thirds of secondary-aged adopted young people told the same Adoption UK survey¹ they had been teased or bullied because they are adopted. If your child is in this situation, you need them to know you take this seriously and will make sure that their school does to.



1. *Bridging the Gap, Giving Adopted Children an Equal Chance in School*, published in 2018 by Adoption UK – full report available from adoptionuk.org

It's not just other children that can be confused about adoption. Teachers and other school staff can have a distorted view of adoption, and often don't appreciate that adopted children are usually also care experienced. People have a tendency to think that children adopted as young babies won't have any problems and that previous bad experiences are wiped out by being adopted. Any policies or training that staff have had in respect of looked after children will be relevant to adopted children too.

Choosing your child's school – quick tips:

- Try and build up as wide a picture as you can: academic achievement may not be the best indicator.
- Ask if they have experience of adopted children and what their support staff are like.
- Ask if they have had any training in attachment or Adverse Childhood Experiences.
- Gauge whether they are listening to your concerns when you meet them, and if you think they will continue to do so.



You might decide that home education or a mixture of school and home school, called flexi schooling, is the best option for your child. There is a growing community making use of an increasing range of resources such as Forest School, smaller independent schools, and many easily accessed free or cost-effective online activities and resources. Local and national museums, places of interest and organisations often offer special discounts and deals to home educating families, and within specific geographical areas groups and families frequently connect with one another to grow close links, create communities and meet together. These connections overcome and address one of the biggest concerns people often have about home education – that of how their child will become socialised.

For some families, home education brings the flexibility of routine that their child needs. Having your parent at close hand and learning together develops and fosters a strong bond and sense of belonging for a child who may never have experienced this in their birth family. Within Scotland there are clear processes that any family wishing to home education must adhere to – you can't just take your child out of school.

Home education is not for every family. Work schedules and commitments might make it impossible and for others, both parents and children may benefit from the routine of a more formal education setting.

Whether you choose to help your child learn at home or by supporting them at school, you'll play an important role in advocating for their needs and making sure the people responsible for their learning have a clear idea about any additional challenges they may face. Like so many areas of adoptive parenting, you'll be learning too. You are not alone in this process, and there are a lot of resources and information available to help you, and to share with your child's school.

What next?

- Refer teachers to Adoption UK's guide, *Let's Learn Together – every school in Scotland has received a copy*. If you need a copy, they are available here **adoptionuk.org/shop**
- Adoption UK produce a range of free fact sheets about adopted children and education, for parents and teachers, available from **adoptionuk.org**
- For further information and guidance about home education visit School House Home Education Association website (**www.schoolhouse.org.uk**). They provide information and support for parents/carers and young people home educating in Scotland.

You cannot pour from an empty cup...

Why self-care and support are important and how to make them work for you

Too often, self-care can be mistaken for selfishness. But it's important to make the distinction between the two. Self-care is a crucial part of being an adoptive parent. We all get stressed, have worries and have times when we feel that things are overwhelming. That's ok, and that is part of life. It's how we deal with these times that counts. By building self-care into your life, it means that you are better able to self-regulate and deal with what life throws at us.

Self-care check

Monitor Get used to monitoring your response to situations. Are you feeling more vulnerable and anxious? Do you need to build up your resilience? If you feel that things are getting to you more than usual, you need to re-assess what you are doing to look after yourself. Practice self-regulation; take time out and a good look at your stress triggers and how you respond. Try to find ways of changing your response so you can deal with stressful situations from a calm place.

Plan It might not feel natural to plan in self-care but make a commitment to do so right from the start of becoming an adoptive parent. This may seem contradictory to the advice about being the main carer for your child, yet having a self-care plan will set a boundary from the beginning. Give yourself permission and make time to do things for yourself. If you are parenting on your own, make plans with family or friends to build time to yourself into your life. If you are part of a couple, look out for one another – take it in turns to take time out, and plan in time to be together, just the two of you. Adopted children may use manipulative behaviour or approaches they have relied on to cope with previous experiences – trying to divide and conquer – and you need to make sure you remain united. We are not suggesting that you take hours out, but some structured time to yourself will increase your resilience levels.

Sustain Be consistent about self-care. Make it a regular part of your routine. It's a good habit to establish and your children need to know that looking after yourself is important – and they should respect that you are a person with needs and emotions too. Being able to regulate yourself is a level of success in itself and a good role model to your child.

Go back to basics If you are struggling, pare things back. Life can be overwhelming and, in an effort to be a super-parent we can take on too much. Think about the essentials that get you through the day: you don't need a spotless house, a meal cooked from scratch and your child to attend a different stimulating and educational activity every day. What they do need is consistency: regular mealtimes, a basic routine and simple things that keep everyone happy.

Talk Make sure you share how you are feeling, good or bad, with your friends and family. Bring someone with experience of adoption into your support network – sometimes only someone who has walked in your shoes can appreciate how you are feeling. And sometimes only a friend can remind you that you are doing a good job (or just get you to have some fun)... Dan Hughes and Jonathan Baylin sum this up nicely in *Brain Based Parenting*, "For optimal benefit your friends should be able to discover the best in you and remind you of your strengths, helpfulness and openness when you forget AND comfort you when times are tough. Using your professional support network can also be very helpful in allowing you to develop a sense of efficacy as a parent and understanding of your child."

Be kind to yourself None of us get it right all the time. And sometimes there is more pressure on adoptive parents to behave in a certain way – you are parenting a child who's already been through so much and you might fear you'll damage them even more if you take a wrong turn. But it's all right to make mistakes, that is part of life, and acknowledging this is part of learning and growing for both you and your child. The most important things to most children are consistency and love. Being kind to yourself models the importance of looking after yourself to your child and demonstrates empathy to yourself. This, in turn, builds up your empathy reserves. Remember too that you are not indispensable, even if it feels like you are sometimes – share the load with other people.

Acknowledge that it's not all rainbows and flowers Settling into parenthood, or the post adoption period, can present its own difficulties for parents. Often these issues are not talked about or acknowledged as the emphasis is on the child and their wellbeing as they settle into a new chapter in their lives. But what about you as a parent? Sometimes admitting there is a problem is too difficult and you may be afraid to tell your social worker for fear of being judged. But no matter how much you have worked and longed for this time, it is hard work and will be stressful – don't be afraid to look for support. Support can come in many forms – comparing notes with other adoptive parents, joining in adoption forums or simply venting to a good friend.

Breathe

Try breathing exercises to reduce your anxiety and get your children to do them with you. This is good for you and good modelling for your children.



What's in your bag of tricks?

What's self-care to one person may not work for another. Some people might enjoy a run, playing sport, getting outside. For others it could be a long bath and a cuppa. Or a night out talking and dancing. It's important to make time to have some fun and be in the moment – try practising mindfulness. Building up your energy and giving your brain a respite from everyday worries is a very powerful way to build up your reserves. Find your own thing that works for you. Taking time out and doing something you enjoy is not an indulgence, it is a crucial part of caring for your family.

Worse case scenarios

Secondary trauma, blocked trust and care, and post-adoption depression

Self-care is not a woolly sentiment, it is an essential element of parenting. We'll all go off track sometimes, but in extremes, a lack of self-care can have severe outcomes. We don't want to scare you but bear these serious conditions in mind...

Secondary trauma is the stress resulting from helping, or wanting to help, a traumatised or suffering person. As an empathetic and caring person, you need to protect yourself from this by ensuring self-care is part of your routine.

Blocked trust is when children block the pain of rejection and the capacity to delight in order to survive in a world without comfort and joy.

Blocked care can happen as a result, when you don't get enough positive feedback from the person you care for. Your ability to empathise and care for your child is reduced so that parenting becomes a chore. Parenting whilst in stressed out survival mode can make you defensive, reactive, unable to emotionally regulate and empathise.

Post-adoption depression does happen. The adoption process is unique and very complex and creates a powerful mix of emotions, such as grief, loss, hope, expectation, anger, fear, joy, guilt – all of which run alongside the bureaucracy and legal framework related to adoption. Added to this can be feelings of frustration through having little control in what is a life-changing decision. A process which can last up to three years can take its toll both physically and mentally; and so, already, even before the challenges of placement, prospective adopters can feel worn down. You might be surprised to experience feelings of depression post placement, just when your dream is finally being realised. Feelings of guilt and fear of being judged might prevent you from seeking help and support at this crucial time: but please, ask for help.

Check out [tend academy](#) for advice on secondary trauma and how to deal with it.



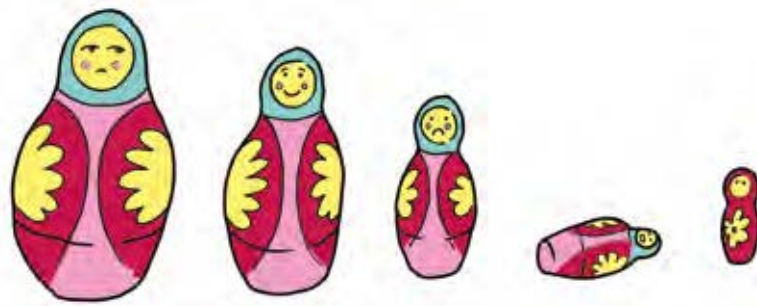
Now over to you...

We appreciate that all the information we've included in the pages of this book is a lot to take in, especially as it's only an introduction to a lifetime of learning

But if there's one thing we'd like you to take away from reading the previous pages, it's that you don't have to go through this journey alone. Adopting gives you access to a whole new community: one that has walked this path before and is willing to share their learnings, insights and experiences. Please reach out when you need to, don't feel this is all on you.

Time and again, we're told that the best advice people going through preparation get is that from people who've already adopted and have been through the process themselves. Previous adopters have been a great source of advice as we've written this publication and we've made sure that the areas they've highlighted as being important or useful are included.

But it seems apt that we end with their words: their answers to the following questions...





What advice would you give someone else who chooses to adopt?



Trust your friends and your instincts

My words of advice: a very strong network is essential. We still see my social worker; she still helps and supports us. And the nursery are helping all they can. I've had very good support from my friends. You have to have a good support network to do this. And secondly, trust your instincts. I felt that my son's reaction to nursery was wrong and I wanted to stop but everyone else told me to carry on. But remember they are your child and you know what's best.

For me a two-year approval process seemed all worthwhile when I met my son for the first time. From the moment I set my eyes on him I adored my little prince and his gorgeous smile. Adopting a child is amazing, special and full of love but parenting is very hard work, so I learnt how important it is to look after yourself, especially as a single adopter. It's been challenging, but what makes it easier is the great support from friends, family and the social workers.

Daniela, about her adoptive son.

Bring the rest of your family on the journey

I went into the adoption process without any expectations. I didn't think about what might be the 'right' child for me. I just knew if I went into the process openly then the right child would come to me. I took on all the information I could and tried to take on some learning from every week. I also tried to educate the rest of the family about what I was learning, about trauma and how it affected people. You can't go into the process with a child in your mind – you have to go into it and learn about adoption and how to incorporate another person into your family.

Follow the process, put the work in, and trust the team working with you. Having my daughter in my life has broadened my outlook and opened my eyes to other people. Having a child with Down's syndrome has allowed us access to a whole new community of friends for both of us. Adoption hasn't closed off opportunities for me, it has opened them up.

Rebecca, about her adoptive daughter.



Don't rule anything out

Stay open minded about what might be right for you. Be guided by your social worker; they created a fantastic match for us and I have a lot of faith in their abilities. We had thought we would get more than one child, but we got what was right for us. Our social worker said we had a lot to offer a child.

Be prepared for an emotional roller coaster. One thing I was totally unprepared for was parental guilt – something we all go through – constantly questioning whether you are doing the right thing. It hits you very quickly as you've got no warm up. But if you have that then it shows you care. It's all about trial and error.

Get support from the adoption community. We're part of an adoptive parents' face-book group. We post questions and seek advice from people who are on there with you. There was huge anxiety in our house over moving from nursery to school. It's a big thing and the practical suggestions of help from the adoption community have been great.

Linda and Keith, about their adoptive daughter.



Be warned: you'll find kinetic sand in things it was never meant to go in!

Don't enter into this lightly. You have to be sure once they are with you that you'll never send them away again. Before you move a child into your life, be sure that that is it, it's unbreakable. You have got to be very convinced about your commitment.

Be realistic. Don't see yourself as a saviour. If the first lot of parents have failed, ask yourself if you can do it. Be very honest about what they will bring into your life and what they need – and whether you are up to that. Don't go into this with rose-tinted spectacles – the older the child the more problems they bring with them.

But saying that, I can't imagine my home without my daughter now. I wish I could bottle this time. I enjoy her and her personality. She's very warm and extrovert and people are naturally drawn to her. One of the things I've noticed is her resilience – she bounces back from any challenges. She's fab and hilarious.

Grace, about her adoptive daughter.

Hold on tight!

I'd say to anyone else going through the adoption process: try and find other people who've been through it. It's such an emotional process so having someone to talk to is very reassuring.

The hardest thing for us was dealing with so much unknown. We are, by nature, planners, and like to think about what needs to be done and what life is going to look like. This process has left a lot out of our control.

Now she's here, we can't decide whether it feels that she has been here forever or whether time has passed in the blink of an eye. My son adores her, and the feeling is mutual. He gets the biggest smiles and loves being her favourite. She arrived as quite a serious baby but is now offering smiles and giggles which is very reassuring for us. We have another five weeks until we can officially adopt her and are ticking off every day that passes.

Mhairi and Derek, about their adoptive daughter.

What has got you through?

She lights up the room...

Be very open with each other, don't be scared to say things that you may be feeling or are anxious about. Talk. Choose the adoption agency very carefully and do a bit of research. Be honest about the children you think you could provide a loving home to.

The best bit of it all? Our daughter, who is just beautiful, loving, funny and an absolute little terror. We were matched and she was placed with us just after her first birthday.

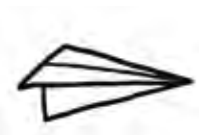
She is the most amazing little person, and she is growing up far too fast. Our entire family dotes on her and she lights up the room for everybody. Every day she comes out with things, or does things, that make everyone roar with laughter. She is ours and she is loved intensely.

Jack and Euan, about their adoptive daughter.



NOTES

In case you have any more questions...



and if you need a hand, call

Adoption UK Scotland

on 0131 322 8500

or AFA Scotland on

0131 322 8490



Thanks to: Andrea Barlow for words, **idesignstudio.com** for design & artwork, **laurabarnard.co.uk** for illustrations and **allander.com** for print.
Produced and published 2019. Copyright Adoption UK & AFA Scotland.

Created by



Adoption & Fostering Alliance Scotland

adoptionuk
for every adoptive family
in Scotland

Funded by



AFA Scotland Registered Charity No. SCO46417. Adoption UK Registered Charity No. SC037892 (Scotland).