

Supporting Adoptive Parents with a New Placement

The fact that you have been given this factsheet means that you are aware of a family who will shortly have, or just have had, a child placed with them whom they hope to legally adopt. You may also be aware that the child has spent some time in the care system (probably in foster care). Adopting a child from the care system means the child will have suffered some sort of abuse or neglect which has necessitated them being removed from their birth family. Sometimes these children have had several foster placements before being placed with prospective adopters. This factsheet will explain how to make this transition as easy as possible for the child and explains some of the reasons why parenting strategies for adopted children are not straightforward.

On Placement

Preparation classes, the long assessment process, approval as prospective adopters and the anxious wait for a match have all taken place. Introductions, usually taking place over a couple of weeks depending on the age of the child, have happened and finally the child has moved in with the adoptive parents.

Social workers will advise new adoptive parents on the benefits of having time alone with their child as a family unit to allow bonding and for the child to get used to their new surroundings. The child may have experienced several moves to different carers in their short life and the idea of being in a permanent home with virtual strangers, whom they now call Mum and Dad, can be difficult for them to comprehend.

Understandably, this can be frustrating for wider family and friends as they naturally want to welcome the child into their circle, but please be patient and take this at the pace the adopters judge is right for the child; they will gradually introduce people when they feel their child is ready. It is also important that a child is not overwhelmed with gifts as this might be something they have not experienced before.

Greeting

Depending on your family norms, you may well greet family members with a hug or kiss. It can be difficult to understand that for some children who have been abused this can set alarm bells ringing and be quite frightening. A child who has been neglected may have never experienced such closeness and this can be equally disturbing for them. Please be guided by the new parents who will know something of the child's history and also by the child themselves.

Names

It is likely the child will keep their first name even after legal adoption. Until the Adoption Order is made, the child keeps their birth surname, but adoptive families often want to keep this confidential

to avoid the risk of the child being traced by the birth family. It would be worth checking with the adopters what names you should use for the child.

Status

Some families feature a mix of birth children and adopted children. It may be tempting to refer to children, for example, as 'your real grandson' or 'your adopted niece' but most adoptive parents (and their children) would probably prefer you didn't make such distinctions. It may also be important for adoptive parents to feel their children are of equal 'status' to other children (grandchildren, cousins, and so on) in the wider family. This can be an especially sensitive issue when a childless (perhaps infertile) couple have adopted a child; they may feel that others' birth children are treated differently. It is worth giving some thought to how you, as a friend or relative of the adopters, can help the child feel welcome and accepted (there will be plenty of things to remind them they are 'newcomers').

The child's story

The new parents will have been told in confidence as much of their child's story as is known but please respect the fact that it is *the child's story to tell* and, as such, their right to keep it private. The adoptive parents are bound by confidentiality as it is important that nothing is revealed that could identify the child's whereabouts to third parties or the child's birth family. While knowledge of a child's past may help people understand the difficulties they now face, it is the role of the adoptive parents (especially when the child is young) to share as much or as little of this with others – including school, medical practitioners and friends – as they think is in the child's best interests.

Parenting strategies

Parenting an adopted child who may have attachment issues (we have a separate factsheet for this which is available on request) and other issues due to their history, is very different from parenting birth children. For example, disciplining an adopted child by sitting them on the 'naughty step' or sending them to their room can evoke feelings of abandonment and/or lack of self worth. Adopted children often feel it is their fault they can't live with their birth family and therefore feel that they must be bad. These children need 'time in' with their parent(s) rather than 'time out'. The adoptive parents will have had some training on what is called 'therapeutic parenting' and will have done a considerable amount of reading on this subject. They are fully conversant with their child's history and will parent accordingly. Loving parents and a new happy home do not undo the past trauma that a child has experienced. Adoptive parents will probably need support from a variety of agencies over a period of time to help them parent their child.

Emotional age versus chronological age

This can be a difficult concept to understand. Children who have experienced trauma and neglect at a crucial stage of child development can have an emotional age much younger than their chronological age. They will need parenting according to this *emotional* age. Eventually these

children can, and do, catch up but it can seem strange to onlookers to see a very much older child being 'babied'. For instance, once a child is placed in a loving family they can revert to being a toddler even though they may be 6 or 7 years old. They may refuse to dress themselves and want their parents to do this for them or they may have toddler tantrums. Some even revert back to wanting a baby bottle. Part of this can be about re-doing a stage of development that they missed out on due to crises in their early lives. Having an idea of the child's emotional age can help in both understanding and in parenting strategies.

The Wall exercise on our website (www.adoptionuk.org/thewall) 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.

The child's understanding

A young child may hear the word 'adopted' but not really understand what this means. For instance, some children may think that this is something that happens to all children and therefore be accepting. Gradually, the knowledge dawns that they are the exception rather than the rule and this can be a painful process. Certain events, sounds and smells can give them flashbacks to their previous life and the parents and wider family can be perplexed by what has precipitated certain behaviour. It may not be possible to identify all or any of the triggers, particularly if the trauma/abuse happened during babyhood. It can therefore be perplexing for all, including the child, when for no apparent reason they become anxious and begin to act out. As the child gets older there may be times when they struggle with their history, for example:

School projects

Doing family trees or being asked to bring in a photograph of themselves as a baby can be especially difficult. Adopted children often don't have baby photographs and those they do have (in their Life Story Book, for example) may show them with birth or foster families, bearing little connection with, or resemblance to, their present circumstances. It is always worth checking with the school as to what projects, talks and so on are on the curriculum.

Teenage years

Searching for their own identity can be a particularly difficult stage for an adopted child. 'Who do I look like?' and 'Who do I take after?' are questions that typically stir up all sorts of feelings and emotions.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. As you can see your support for the new family will be invaluable, especially your understanding of different parenting strategies for some of these traumatised children.

Further reading

Argent, Hedi (2011) *Related by Adoption: A Handbook for Grandparents and Other Relatives*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Espley, Jane (2004) *Welcoming Children into your Neighbourhood*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Howe, David (1996) *Adopters on Adoption: Reflections on Parenthood and Children*, British Association for Adoption and Fostering

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