

Information for Children's Social Workers

What is an Adoption Activity Day?

Adoption Activity Days are an addition to the existing range of family finding and matching practices. They allow for prospective adopters to directly meet a range of children waiting to be adopted in a prepared, supported, safe and fun environment. Adoption Activity Days are entirely child-centred, predominantly an activity day for children, and the most important factor is that the children have a really fun day. Adoption Activity Days are a progression from exchange days and video profiling events and have been used successfully in the USA over a number of years to find families for children who otherwise may wait a long time.

A pilot project externally funded and managed by the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (no longer in operation) was set up in January 2011 and ran until March 2013. The original aim was to facilitate four Adoption Activity Days in partnership with the East Midlands adoption consortium, although a fifth event was held in March 2013. A nationwide Adoption Activity Days service was established in June 2013 and, following BAAF's closure in July 2015, the service transferred to CoramBAAF and is currently working in partnership with 140 local authorities in England.

What is significant in the 4 pilots is that what has happened in the US has happened here too. Some significant matches and some unexpected matches have been made. There is something about chemistry that can provide the foundation for a successful match and I hope we'll see much more initiative being given to adopters, working in partnership with social workers.

Martin Narey, 2013

At an Adoption Activity Day children will have the opportunity to meet other children who live with foster carers and to meet families who would like to adopt. Adoption Activity Days are also an opportunity for children to be actively involved in their family finding process. Providing preparation for attending an Adoption Activity Day is undertaken honestly and sensitively with the child, the event can help children to shape their own pathway to permanence.

What are the outcomes?

Over 1000 children and prospective adoptive families have attended more than 50 Adoption Activity Days since February 2014 and in the year 2014-2015, 28% of children were placed with adoptive families as a result of attending an Adoption Activity Day.

There are also been many 'softer' benefits.

- **For prospective adopters:** the opportunity to meet 'real' children, dispelling the myths about children in care and having the opportunity to think more widely about the kind of child or children they could parent, in addition to feeling more confident about what they have to offer as potential parents.
 - **For foster carers:** to be involved in the child's family finding process, to get to know the child in different ways and to have fun with the child.
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- **For Social Workers:** the opportunity to spend quality time with the child, improving their practice by undertaking direct work with the child and by writing a profile. For prospective adopters' Social Workers: the opportunity to observe and experience adopters in the company of and playing with children.
- **For children:** the opportunity to meet other children in foster care waiting to be adopted and to meet families who would like to adopt; to be involved in their own family finding and to have fun.

What is the impact on the child of attending an Adoption Activity Day?

It is likely that you are referring the child to an Adoption Activity Day because finding an adoptive family for them will be a challenge and/or will take a long time. The child may already have waited a considerable amount of time because other more traditional methods of family finding have been unsuccessful.

You may worry that the child will feel hurt or rejected if they are not 'chosen' by prospective adoptive parents after the Adoption Activity Day. Following preparation work with the child, they know that whatever happens at the Adoption Activity Day, they are going home with their foster carer. There is no sense that they will be 'chosen' on the day or go home with somebody else. The message for the child is that a family has to be right for them and if the right people aren't there on the day, you will continue looking.

All family finding activities carry emotional risk for children but generally children feel reassured after an Adoption Activity Day: that there are other children like them who live with foster carers and are waiting to be adopted; that they have met some adopters who are friendly and caring people just like their carers; and, that they know what you are doing to find people who are special enough to be their family.

Who should attend the Adoption Activity Day?

You will attend the Adoption Activity Day to talk to prospective adopters about the child and to answer any questions prospective adopters may have. Sometimes another professional, such as the child's Family Finder, has a more established relationship with the child and he or she may attend the Adoption Activity Day in your place if appropriate.

Children attend the Adoption Activity Day with *one* foster carer. Other children in placement with the foster carer, the foster carer's own children and the Supervising Social Worker must not attend. This is a strict policy designed to protect the confidentiality of the children in attendance and to control the number of adults at the event. You should contact CoramBAAF if there is a need for more than one foster carer to attend the Adoption Activity Day; for example, if you are attending with a sibling group or if the child has additional needs.

How should the child be prepared for the Adoption Activity Day?

Many of the principles of good practice that apply to preparing children for permanence are also applicable to Adoption Activity Days; however, there are aspects of preparing a child to attend an Adoption Activity Day that warrant some individual attention. Throughout the preparation process you should involve the people that the child identifies as important and you should work with these people to prepare the child for the Adoption Activity Day. This will include: ensuring that all individuals understand that the plan for the child is adoption and what this involves; discussing the potential impacts on the child of attending the Adoption Activity Day and how they can support the child; and, asking the individuals to provide important information about the child.

The prospect of becoming part of a new family is a huge change for a child and can be extremely overwhelming. Many children will view the family finding process with a mixture of excitement and dread, and are likely to experience a range of intense and conflicting emotions. It is important that the professionals around the child listen to and validate the child's feelings and answer the child's questions about the process.

Children being placed with permanent new families are often contending with moves from poorly understood pasts to what may be very different but equally unknown futures.

Romaine et al. *Preparing Children for Permanence*, BAAF:2007:1

Consider the following guidance when planning to prepare the child to attend an Adoption Activity Day:

Honesty and information

The child should understand, in a way that makes sense to them, why they cannot live with their birth family and what their plan is. Often the child will have some knowledge of what happened in their family that led to them being unable to live at home; however, the child is more likely to have some misconceptions about this and may not be ready to acknowledge what has happened. It is important that the child has information about their background; their birth family and siblings (if any); relatives and other important connections. Although some of this work may have been started by other people, it is vital to explore the child's current understanding and preparedness for moving to a new family. This can be done through: discussions with the child that may or may not involve others, such as their foster carer; life story work; and, direct work involving artistic mediums. The child needs to be supported through the grieving process by you, their carers and other adults in their life. Transitions are difficult for most people but particularly so for children who have experienced trauma and abuse.

The process of family finding

Explain to the child that you are trying to find the right family for them to grow up in; involve the child in this process by talking to them about the different ways of family finding (including Adoption Activity Days) and encourage them to contribute to their written profile. Open up a discussion about what sort of family the child would like to grow up in and about how long the family finding process may take and why. It is especially important that all of the adults around the child (you, the child's foster carer and the child's Family Finder) demonstrate confidence in this process and a commitment to seeing it through with the child.

Repeat, repeat, repeat

It is likely that the child will need to have conversations about family finding and adoption over and over again. The child will experience different stages of loss and grief, and their thoughts and feelings will inevitably change over time. Children may hear different messages in different ways so repetition can improve their understanding and you may evaluate whether the child has realistic expectations.

The purpose and benefits of an Adoption Activity Day

Attending an Adoption Activity Day may reassure the child that they are not the only one waiting for an adoptive family. It will give them an opportunity to find out more about families who would like to adopt and to begin to think about what sort of family they would like to live with. The Adoption Activity Day will help the child to understand what is being done to find them a family and is an opportunity for you to learn more about the child and for you to have fun together.

Before attending the Adoption Activity Day, ask yourself:

- How well do I know the child?
- What types of family finding am I comfortable with and why?
- What efforts have been made previously at family finding? What was the outcome? Was the child involved?
- Will the child cope with attending the Adoption Activity Day?
- What is the child's understanding of adoption/permanency?
- Are there any geographical considerations to take into account (e.g. location of birth family)?

Useful tips

- The child should understand that the plan for them is adoption and that you and others are looking for families who might be right for them.
- Explain to the child that there will be families at the Adoption Activity Day who would like to adopt, as well as other children who are waiting to be adopted.
- Be honest with the child: there are no guarantees that the right family for them will be at the Adoption Activity Day; it is a chance to find out about adoption and have a good time.
- Explain to the child what will happen on the day: who will be taking them; where they are going, what it will be like and what will happen afterwards.
- Reassure the child that, at all times, they will be with an adult whom they know and trust (you or their foster carer) and that you will keep them safe.
- Help the child to feel confident: practice introducing themselves and talking about their likes and dislikes.
- Discuss confidentiality with the child: only first names will be used.
- Maintain the focus on having a good time and enjoying the activities on offer.

The level of understanding of children whom we come into contact with continues to amaze me. When looking towards how they manage disappointment we can at times underestimate their resilience. Sometimes we need to accept that it is better to have tried and risk disappointment, rather than not to have used every opportunity made available to seek a suitable family.

Preparing all concerned to participate in Activity Days is time consuming for the Social Worker. Be prepared that the child or their carer may at any time decide they no longer wish to attend the event.

Social Worker (preparing a child to attend an Adoption Activity Day)

What is my role at the Adoption Activity Day?

Alongside the child's foster carer, you are there to support the child to attend and participate in the Adoption Activity Day. It is especially important that you are positive about their attendance at the event and encourage them to have fun. Throughout the afternoon, you will be expected to engage with prospective adopters and to enable them to interact with the child. Be mindful that the adopters will be feeling nervous and apprehensive: be friendly, draw them into your activity and stand back when the child appears comfortable.

You will also have a role in answering any questions the prospective adopters may have. You may share information with adopters about the children with the exception of identifying information about their birth family or where they are currently living. You may talk to

prospective adopters in general terms about the child's history, their specific needs, the progress they have made in placement and what they will need in terms of future parenting.

It is important that prospective adopters do not ask children personal or intrusive questions and you may have to act sensitively to protect the child by changing the subject or using distraction. It is also important that prospective adopters do not have a conversation about the child in front of them or within earshot. Adopters may wish to talk with you or the child's foster carer at some point during the day and these conversations should take place in a private and confidential space.

What will happen on the day?

You, the child and their foster carer will register at the venue and there will be various activities and games to choose from. There will be around two hours of free play before we usually stop for something light to eat followed by an entertainment show. At the end of the Adoption Activity Day, each child will be given a small gift.

Adoption Activity Days usually have a theme and you, the child and the child's foster carer will be invited to dress up. Popular themes include: My Favourite Character, Jungle, Superheroes, Pirates and the Circus. Activities taking place may include: arts & crafts; face painting; soft play; toys, games & books; sports; cupcake decorating; balloon modelling and magic. Children have a free choice of activities and there are opportunities for prospective adopters to sit alongside them drawing, crafting and talking as well as to join in livelier games.

After the Adoption Activity Day

Following the Adoption Activity Day, talk to the child about their experience of the day and what they enjoyed and perhaps didn't enjoy as much. The child may even offer their views about the prospective adoptive families they met. The adopters may make expressions of interest in the child and these will be communicated to you. CoramBAAF advises all professionals to be available to and to make contact with those attending an Adoption Activity Day in the days immediately after the event so as to offer support and to recognise the emotional impacts of the day. Everybody in attendance at the Adoption Activity Day is asked to provide written feedback to CoramBAAF in order to shape future events.

Useful resources

Judith Foxon, *Nutmeg Gets Adopted* (BAAF, 2001)

Helen Kahn, *Tia's/Tyler's Wishes* (BAAF, 2003)

Angela Lidster, *Chester and Daisy Move On* (BAAF, 1995)

Joe Griffiths and Tony Pilgrim, *Picnic in the Park* (BAAF, 2007)

Rebecca Daniel, *Finding a Family for Tommy* (BAAF, 2009)

Paul Sambrooks, *Dennis Duckling* (The Children's Society, 2000)

Paul Sambrooks, *Dennis and the Big Decision* (BAAF, 2011)

Mary Romaine et al., *Preparing Children for Permanence* (BAAF, 2007)

Tony Ryan and Roger Walker, *Life Story Work* (BAAF, 2007)

Berni Stringer, *Communicating Through Play* (BAAF, 2009)

Mary Corrigan and Joan Moore, *Listening to Children's Wishes and Feelings* (BAAF, 2011)

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