Information for Foster Carers

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 BAAFs closure in July 2015, the service transferred to CoramBAAF and is currently working in partnership with 140 local authorities in England.

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.

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

The child currently placed with you has been referred to an Adoption Activity Day because it is likely that 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 you. 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, their Social Worker 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 you; and, that they know what their Social Worker is doing to find people who are special enough to be their family.

Attending an Adoption Activity Day with the child placed with you provides an opportunity for you to contribute and be involved in the child's family finding. You are in a unique position to support the child before, during and after the event and how you do this will of course depend on the child's age and understanding. However, even very young children can develop an understanding of why their lives are changing, who cares for them and what will happen next.

Who should attend the Adoption Activity Day?

Children who have been referred to the Adoption Activity Day attend with *one* foster carer. Other children in placement with you, your own children and your 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. The child's Social Worker 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.

The child's Social Worker 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 place of the child's Social Worker.

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

You, your Supervising Social Worker and the child's Social Worker can work together to prepare the child to attend the Adoption Activity Day. 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

The child you are looking after may need a lot of reassurance that they will be going home from the Adoption Activity Day with you and nobody else. Check their understanding of this and correct any misconceptions they might have.

Consider the following guidance when planning to prepare the child with the child's Social Worker and your Supervising Social Worker:

The process of family finding

Explain to the child that you and their Social Worker are trying to find the right family for them to grow up in; talk to the child about the different ways of family finding and about Adoption Activity Days. 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 Social Worker 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.

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.

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 Social Worker) 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.

Your role at the Adoption Activity Day
Alongside the child's Social Worker, 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 you are supporting. 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 Social Worker 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 and the child 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 Social Worker 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 one or more expressions of interest in a child or children they met and these will be explored by the agencies involved. This may include exchange of written information, such as reports, in order to establish whether there appears to be a good match and you might be asked for your views about this. CoramBAAF advises all professionals to be available to and 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.

Thank you for participating in Adoption Activity Days: CoramBAAF recognises the additional work foster carers undertake in preparing and supporting children before, during and after the event and are committed to working with foster carers to ensure that the Adoption Activity Day is a positive experience for every child.

For tools to help children talk about their wishes and feelings and to make sense of their experiences, speak to your Supervising Social Worker or the child's Social Worker. You may also contact CoramBAAF Adoption Activity Days or research the following publications:

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)

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