

1 Introduction

Excited little girls in pink tutus and wide-eyed little boys dressed as clowns or ringmasters, some still clutching a pretend ticket to the "circus", are playing in a large, light-filled hall. Some of the adults watching or playing with them are wearing lion outfits or colourful wigs, hats and stripey socks. Someone is juggling. A giant white rabbit appears to be carrying around a man wearing a top hat. The children can dance to the music, have their faces painted, play with dough, colour in a huge circus frieze, clamber over large foam blocks or through play tunnels and explore new toys. Outside, in the sunshine, there's a bouncy castle to jump around on, ropes and balls to play with and adults waiting to help make dens from cardboard, fabric and sticky tape. Thousands of bubbles float through the air. Someone is making balloon models and giving them to any child who wants one. Later, there will be a magic show.

It's every child's dream party. And it's a party with a difference – it is bringing together children who need an adoptive family with adults who want to adopt a child or children. If the chemistry between them is right, a short time spent playing together this afternoon could change the course of their lives.

Adoption Activity Days are informal events with the emphasis on providing a fun day for children who need adoption. But the underlying aim is serious: finding adoptive families for children who are the most difficult to place. The events allow prospective adopters to meet children, talk to them and play with them. For some, this allows them to imagine life with that child in a way that simply reading a paper profile or seeing a video never could.

A pilot project was run in a partnership between BAAF and the East Midlands Adoption Consortium between January 2011 and March 2013. Five Adoption Activity Days were held. The aim of the project was to determine whether Adoption Activity Days could replicate the success of these events in the USA in finding adoptive families for children. The pilot project matched a significant number of "harder to place" children and the Department for Education (DFE) announced, on 24 December 2012, that Adoption Activity Days would be part of the Government's adoption reform agenda in England.

BAAF now offers a permanent service to agencies and consortia that wish to facilitate an Adoption Activity Day in their own area. Between the

end of the pilot project in April 2013 and the time of writing (November 2014), BAAF successfully facilitated 41 Adoption Activity Days. There is now an activity day being run somewhere in England almost every weekend during term-time.

There has also been interest in running Adoption Activity Days in both Scotland and Wales. Scotland hope to hold their first Adoption Activity Day in March 2015 in partnership with BAAF. Wales have a number of partners interested in running Adoption Activity Days and the first BAAF consultation is scheduled for January 2015. A consultation and profiling workshop was held in Northern Ireland in 2013; however, there seems to be a preference for running small scale events, more akin to a tea party for small groups of children.

The success of the events in England has been encouraging, and the Adoption Activity Days team is keen to explore facilitating events elsewhere in the UK. Funding from the Department for Education and the Big Lottery has enabled the rolling out of Adoption Activity Days in England, which explains the frequent references in this guide made to legislation and requirements in England as this is where the initial project has been established and extended.

This guide provides an outline of how to set up and run an Adoption Activity Day, based on the learning from the pilot project and the significant number of events that have been run since then. It includes practical guidance for planning and managing the day, with checklists and many useful sample documents and forms. It also aims to provide a real insight into the feelings and emotions surrounding Adoption Activity Days, with numerous quotes and case studies that bring to life what it is like to be involved in or to attend an Adoption Activity Day.