

Adopting a child

**The definitive guide to
adoption in England,
Wales and Northern
Ireland**

Jenifer Lord

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Note about the author

Jenifer Lord was for many years a child placement consultant who worked in BAAF's Southern England office. She is also the author of *The Adoption Process in England*, and has co-authored *Effective Adoption Panels*, *Effective Fostering Panels* and *Together or Apart? Assessing siblings for permanent placement*.

Becoming an adoptive parent

The journey to become adoptive parents does not start from the same place, or finish in the same place, for all people...My journey began with the long-held expectation that I would become a father. The next chapter of the journey was the recognition that this was not happening, followed by the realisation that it was not going to.

Unlike others, we elected not to go the IVF route, we did consider adoption but didn't pursue it at the time. Instead, the next twist in the tale was relaxing with our fate and becoming happy and content as two.

Looking at adoption had sown a seed though, and we couldn't help but think that all those positives we had for two were there to share with a third. We had loving hearts and a home to share and there might be a child out there who could benefit from that.

So, with undecided minds we set the ball rolling, the plan being to learn more so that we could make our decision. The adoption preparation course did just that; we learned of the children who are in care needing families and the issues they face.

There were fears that seemed like risks: I was aware of some of the effects of trauma in childhood and of the challenges, and the challenging behaviour, that it could bring. There were also hopes: that we would make a real difference for a little person and get to experience the joys that being a parent brings.

The assessment process proved to be not just us being evaluated, it was an education and reassurance. It answered many questions, explored many issues, agreed and defined our limits and made us aware of the support we could draw upon to make this union a successful one.

Adoption isn't for everyone, but it's more accessible than many might think. It's certainly a journey that requires a bit

of bravery and tenacity to bring to fruition – and of course you live with your child's background, just as they do.

So fast forward to our present day and we now share our lives with a beautiful baby girl – and we love each other. We are immersed in the joys and anxieties of parenthood – and it's amazing.

I doubt I will do anything more worthwhile in my lifetime.

Stephen, adoptive dad, CoramBAAF blog

Introduction

Sometimes you feel really scared because you never know if your new parents will be as kind as you want them to be. Sometimes you'll feel really happy because your old parents were mean to you and you're glad to get a new start to life. Sometimes it's most scary because you're only young and you are not used to moving. But you'll always feel a sigh of relief when everything goes really well.

Different feelings you feel on being adopted, by Jessica, age 9, *The Colours in Me*

Between 4,000–4,500 children are currently adopted each year in the UK.* Over 90 per cent of these are children who have been looked after by a local authority. The others are predominantly children adopted by their parent and step-parent, and about 100–150 are children who have been brought from overseas and adopted by people living in the UK. There is a chapter in this book that focuses on step-families considering adoption, and one that focuses on people considering adopting from overseas. The rest of this book is about the

* Figures are estimated, based on information available from different parts of the UK. There are some variations in the detail of what is collected and the most recent figures available but efforts have been made to ensure that the overall picture is realistic.

adoption of children who are looked after by local authorities. There is also a chapter on meeting these children's needs through fostering.

There are currently nearly 100,000 children looked after by local authorities in the UK, 70 per cent of whom live in foster homes. Many looked after children will return home to their family within a year.

The number of looked after children who are adopted represents a tiny proportion of all looked after children. Around 75 per cent of the looked after children adopted recently in England were aged between one and four. This reflects the wishes of many adopters to parent preschool children and the relative ease with which adoption agencies are able to recruit adopters for young children. It doesn't reflect the needs of many waiting children for whom new families are urgently needed.

Children who wait to be placed for adoption tend to be older. There are single children but many are in groups of brothers and sisters who need placement together. There are children with disabilities who range in age from babies upwards. There are children from a huge variety of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds. Many of the children have been abused and/or neglected before they are taken into local authority care and they will have been further confused and upset by uncertainty and moves after coming into care.

Just as there is a wide range of children needing adoption, so will a wide range of people be welcomed by adoption agencies to adopt them. People of every ethnic, religious and cultural background, couples and single people – heterosexual as well as lesbian and gay, both with or without children – older people, people who have been divorced, all can and do become successful adoptive parents. And the great majority of adoptions work out well. Like all parents, adoptive parents get huge joy and satisfaction from parenting their children, as well as finding it very hard work and sometimes frustrating and painful.

Traditionally, adoption, for children not previously known to the families adopting them, was seen as severing connections with the past and starting afresh. Now it is understood how important it is to

provide adoptive parents with as much information as possible to pass on to their children, and how important their heritage is for those children. Many adopted children continue to maintain important relationships – sometimes with their birth parents, more often with other family members like brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Adoption agencies do not expect you to know all about adoption before you approach them. They will provide information and opportunities for you to find out about what will be involved, for instance, by introducing you to experienced adoptive parents. They are also working hard to provide better help and support to you and your child once you are living together and after you have adopted. Help is also available from adoptive parents' support groups and, in England and Wales, from post-adoption centres.

We hope that this book will answer most of your initial questions as well as clarify anything that may have previously puzzled you about adoption – the processes, the cost, the legal issues, etc. All these and many other issues are addressed in this book. These are illustrated with real-life experiences in which people candidly talk about what went right and what went wrong, and how they were helped or helped themselves to create a safe, secure and loving family environment for a child or children who needed this. For children who have to be separated from their birth families, having a new permanent family by adoption is an experience that must fulfil their needs and help them through to a fulfilling adulthood.

A glossary of terms that are used in this book and which may be unfamiliar to you is provided at the end.

Adoption legislation

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 was fully implemented in England and Wales in December 2005. It is underpinned by more than 10 sets of regulations and also by Statutory Guidance.

There are National Minimum Standards for adoption work in England and Wales. These standards form the basis for inspection of adoption services.

Your local adoption agency will be able to give you up-to-date information and there are links to the Standards and legislation at www.corambaaf.org.uk.

Adoption is changing and developing and it will be important for you to check with a local adoption agency about any significant changes at the time you make your initial enquiries.

Scope of this edition

The content of this edition applies to England, where some new adoption regulations and statutory guidance were introduced in 2013. Much of it also applies to Wales, and quite a lot to Northern Ireland, although recognising that there are variations between the different countries.

If you live in Scotland and are interested in adoption, *Adopting a Child in Scotland*, for prospective adopters living in Scotland, will be more relevant to you (available from CoramBAAF).

Adoption as a legal process was first established in 1926 in England and Wales, in 1929 in Northern Ireland, and in 1930 in Scotland. Although these are separate jurisdictions, the legal framework for adoption was very similar and was primarily about legal security for babies relinquished by their birth parents. Now that most children placed for adoption with non-relatives have spent a period looked after by the local authority, planning for them must also take account of other child care legislation.

There is one Adoption and Children Act for England and Wales but separate regulations. Northern Ireland has tended to look towards England and Wales in developing its legislation.

However, there are some differences in practice and procedures.

In Northern Ireland there are still a small number of babies who come into or are removed to care at a very early age and proceed to adoption. Adoption as a route out of care for older children in Northern Ireland continues to be developed.

As stated previously, much of the text that follows will be relevant to England, Wales and Northern Ireland but more information about local variations can be obtained from your local adoption agency. The legislation provides for children moving from one legal jurisdiction to another so that children can be linked with families across the UK.

Just as the law has been updated over the 80-plus years that legal adoption has been possible, so practice has changed tremendously. The rest of this book will tell you more about this. One aspect of this that affects the delivery of adoption services is the change in local government. At first, much of the adoption service was provided by voluntary adoption agencies. Now there are fewer such agencies and most children placed are the responsibility of their local authority children's services, which also act as adoption agencies to recruit and prepare adopters. A number of councils have been looking at different ways of delivering services. Children's services may now be joined with education or housing services so that where reference is made to children's services or Directors, you may need to check the precise names/designations locally. Although these terms are not accurate when applied to Northern Ireland, we have used them for the sake of simplicity. In Northern Ireland, children's services are provided by Health and Social Care Trusts.

We adopted our three fabulous children nearly two-and-a-half years ago now. At the time they were three, four and nearly six years old. Why did we adopt a sibling group? The most obvious reason was that we had always wanted a big family and it seemed logical to us that if we were going to adopt more than one child then it would be nice if they came together and had a shared history. Maybe a less obvious, but probably more emotive, reason was that we both have fond memories of growing up with our own siblings. When we

read that sibling groups that cannot find adoptive placements together can be placed separately, it really broke our hearts. And finally we felt that we had so much love and devotion to give to our "prospective children" that we were likely to overwhelm just one child!

Adopters, CoramBAAF website

Children needing adoption

I was adopted when I was small...I am glad I am adopted, although adoption brings with it feelings of loss, sadness, anger and many, many more feelings, it also brings great joy and happiness to everyone involved. I would like to say thank you to my family for adopting me and for being the best ever. I love them so much. They have changed my life so much for the better. I could never describe how much.

When I am older, maybe when I am a granny, after I have been a policewoman and a mummy and a sailing instructor for disabled children, I would like to be able to give other children another chance in life like I was given. I think it is a lovely thing to do as children also have feelings which are valid and should be recognised, and every child deserves to be loved no matter who they are or what they are like. Every child is special and worth something in the world.

Julia, age 14, *The Colours in Me*

Just over 2,000 children currently in the care system in England could be placed for adoption with families if the families were available. Although the children are very different, they all have one thing in common: a need for a family.

It is recognised that, for nearly all children, life in a family is best. A new family can bring love and security to the child – and a child can bring joy and satisfaction to the family. Every child is different and brings the potential for different sorts of satisfaction just as they will bring their own set of needs and challenges. The adoption agency's job, with your help, is to match that child's potential and needs with your abilities and expectations.

Are there any babies needing adoption?

Of around 3,100 children adopted in the UK in the year to March 2020, around 240 were babies under one. Today it is easier for women to choose to parent on their own and fewer single mothers are placing their babies for adoption. Contraception is more efficient than it used to be, and fewer unplanned pregnancies occur. It is also easier to terminate pregnancies than previously.

There are a small number of babies who are placed with their parent's consent when they feel unable to parent them, but the majority will need adoption as they have been removed from their parents due to concerns about their lifestyle and this may mean there will be uncertainties about how their pre-birth experiences may impact on them. Some of these children will be placed through Fostering for Adoption, with families who will be able to adopt them if they cannot return to be cared for by their birth family.

Research has shown that it can take longer to find families for children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Adoption agencies are keen to encourage applications from black and Asian families so they can reduce this delay for children. Once you are approved they may encourage you to register with online linking services if there are not many children available locally.

I was aware of the high proportion of black children in the care system, and a real need for black carers to come forward to adopt them. I'm black British of Jamaican origin, so this struck a chord.

Adoptive mum

There are babies with disabilities or disabling conditions such as cerebral palsy and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder who need to be adopted. There are also some babies with genetic factors in their background, such as schizophrenia or Huntington's Chorea, for whom it is not always easy to find adoptive families.

Toddlers and preschool children

Children aged between one and five are the largest group of children adopted in the UK. This reflects the wishes of many adopters to parent preschool children and the relative ease with which adoption agencies are able to recruit adopters for young children. The majority of these placements work out extremely successfully. However, these children often have complex needs. They may have been abused and neglected and given little opportunity to make attachments to reliable parent figures. They may be very confused about all that has happened in their short lives and unable to trust in anyone. In addition, there may also be uncertainties about their development which may not be resolved until they are older. Families need to be able to take on these issues and to access support and advice.

What about older children?

Many children waiting to be adopted are aged five or over. They may have lived for some years with one or both of their parents, or other

family members, or they may have had many moves in and out of foster homes, and the damage done by these experiences can last a very long time. Older children need especially resilient parents who can help them face up to the past – including their possible need to keep in touch with some members of their family – and see them through the difficult adolescent years to maturity. In a loving and secure home, most of these children will eventually begin to thrive, although the older they are, the longer it may take.

Being adopted is great because you know who you are with a family who cares for you and loves you very much. I know it may be hard to leave your parents but you know they can't look after you, but they can write to you and they will always love you.

Rebecca, age 11, *The Colours in Me*

Children who have been looked after by a local authority for months or years are likely to have emotional and behavioural problems because of the experiences which led to them having to be separated from their birth families, but also because of not having a permanent parent figure in their lives. Even young children soon learn that there isn't much point in getting attached to an adult who is soon going to disappear out of their lives. They may find it difficult to become attached to a new family and are likely to test out their new parents with challenging behaviour. Young children may be more like babies in their behaviour sometimes, and even teenagers may act like very young children. But most children of all ages can eventually settle when they realise that they really are part of the family.

There are children who have been so hurt by their past experiences that they will go on having additional needs throughout their childhood, even though they have clearly benefited from becoming a loved member of the family. If you adopt a child who is likely to have particular ongoing needs, you should ensure as far as possible that

the agency will make arrangements for them to have any special help they may continue to require on a long-term basis.

The other thing about adopting older children is that you know if there are any medical issues or developmental issues. A lot of the issues that affect children in care will be evident, whereas if they are a year old, you might not know.

Adopter, The Pink Guide to Adoption

Groups of brothers and sisters

Around half of all the children waiting for adoptive families in England are in groups of brothers and sisters needing to be placed together. Most of these children are in groups of two, although there are some groups of three or more. Brothers and sisters can provide support and comfort for each other throughout their lives. If they want to stay together and if an assessment of their needs has shown that one family could parent them successfully, it is very sad if they have to be separated because no families come forward for them all. You may be daunted by the practicalities, but extra help and support could and should be available (see Chapter 5). Brothers and sisters share a family history and can support each other in making sense of what has happened to them. Research indicates that, compared to children of the same age placed on their own, brothers and sisters placed together are likely to do as well or better.

There can be rivalry and spats, and their perception sometimes is that they "hate" each other! But it's obvious that having each other is a tremendous reassurance. It is the only constant and stable thing they've had in their lives.

Adopters of three brothers

Disabled children or children who have complex needs

Many children waiting to be placed for adoption have special needs that can range from health conditions, to learning or physical disabilities, and emotional or behavioural difficulties. For some children, their future development may be uncertain, or they may be too young for a prognosis to be made.

A disability can be anything from autism to Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy to a visual impairment, and each child will be affected and respond differently.

Disabled children or children with complex needs may be placed for adoption at a very young age because their parents feel unable to care for them. They may be looked after by the local authority after their parents have tried unsuccessfully to cope. So they may feel the impact both of their disability, the loss of their family of origin, and perhaps the confusion of a residential setting where different staff come and go. People who adopt these children will need to be prepared for a challenging yet rewarding task, as some of the children may never be able to lead entirely independent lives. In some cases, experience of disability in prospective adopters – either their own personal or professional experience or that of their children – will be positively welcomed.

Learning disabilities/difficulties, special educational needs

There are many babies and older children who have learning difficulties/disabilities waiting for adoption, for example, children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. These are children who, as well as individual love and care, need additional help and support to enable them to participate in as many as possible of the experiences and opportunities open to any other child.

There are many children whose learning disabilities are not clear-cut: they may have suffered an accident or injury while very young which has affected their ability to learn or to understand the world around them – but no one knows how much. Or they may have been born with a disability that isn't clear to doctors. They may have been chronically neglected and/or abused as a baby and young child, and the extent of the damage this has caused and the possibility of change may still be unclear.

Many of the children will have special educational needs and may need to receive additional support at school, such as speech and language therapy or extra help from a teacher or assistant. Some children may have missed out on some of their education, or find it difficult to learn and concentrate. If the child's needs cannot be met by the resources of their school, it may be in their best interests to attend a different type of school, perhaps one that provides a more specialist education.

Our fourth birth child taught us not to be afraid of disability. She was born with Edward's Syndrome, and through this we became aware of the disabled children left in hospital because their parents found it too difficult to cope. So we decided to adopt.

Adoptive mum of two disabled children, *Could you be my Parent?*

Physical disabilities

There are many types of physical disability – cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida and cystic fibrosis are just some of them. Children with these disabilities need the love and security that life in a family offers just as much as other children do. And, like most children, they will give love and affection in return. Having a physical disability does not mean having a learning disability too, although

people sometimes confuse the two. People with physical disabilities can lead increasingly independent lives nowadays – especially if they have the support of a loving family.

Developmental delay/developmental uncertainty

Children who fall behind the progress made by most other children of their age are said to be delayed in their physical, emotional, intellectual or educational development. Where this delay is due to past experiences of disruptions or lack of care or stimulation, it may be temporary. It can also last longer. For some children, their delay may be linked to learning or physical impairments.

With some children there is a level of uncertainty over their future development. This uncertainty may be based on the knowledge that their birth mother used drugs or alcohol during pregnancy, or that one birth parent has a condition such as, for instance, schizophrenia, which the child may inherit or develop at a later stage. For some children, especially if they are very young, a precise developmental assessment hasn't been carried out yet and there is no clear diagnosis or prognosis.

Emotional and behavioural needs

It is common for many children needing adoption to have previously experienced lack of care, lack of supervision, including neglect, or physical, emotional or sexual abuse, as well as separation and loss from their birth family. The majority of the children waiting for new families, including babies and infants, will have specific emotional needs due to their early life experiences.

Many children, particularly those who have had more than one carer, will have emotional or behavioural issues, such as attachment difficulties. Attachment is the process of emotional bonding between babies and their main carers, which is usually the mother, in the first

few years of life. Research indicates that missing out on this connection can affect a child's social behaviour and emotional development.

Many children can find it hard to "recover" from their early difficult experiences, even with lots of love and attention from their adoptive family. Some children benefit from therapy or other types of support. Some children's needs are best met when they are the youngest or only child in their adoptive family.

Are children from different ethnic backgrounds waiting to be adopted?

Yes, there are children from a great variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds waiting for adoption. They all need families who will cherish and value their heritage and identity; families who either match their ethnicity, culture, religion and language as closely as possible, or who can actively promote these aspects of their identity.

Do the children all have contact with their birth families?

It depends on what is meant by contact. It can mean anything from an adoption where the child has regular face-to-face – known as "direct" – contact with members of his or her birth family to an adoption where the adopters have met the birth parents once and there is an annual letter exchanged via the adoption agency, called "indirect" or "letterbox" contact. Many children being placed for adoption now will have a plan for their adoptive parents to have at least an annual exchange of news with their birth family via the adoption agency. Others will need and want to meet members of their birth family, sometimes grandparents, brothers and sisters, and occasionally their parents, perhaps once or twice a year.

Contact must be planned to meet the child's needs. These will change over time and everyone involved needs to be prepared to be flexible. Contact can be very positive and can result in a child being more rather than less settled in their new family. Contact can sometimes be easier for everyone to manage if the child's adopters match their heritage as closely as possible. You will need to be clear what the plan for contact is for any child whom you plan to adopt.

Our twin boys joined us when they were three... Direct contact is planned with their other siblings twice a year. The boys don't have memories of living with them so we are going into the unknown, but so far their relationships seem very positive. We talk about their siblings and have photos around the home.

Adopter
