

PREFACE

Becoming a parent is to start on an exciting and emotional journey. There are many ways to become a parent and each can have its challenges, but arguably one of the most challenging is becoming a parent through adoption of children who have been removed from their birth parents and placed into the care system.

As you have chosen to read this book, there is a high chance that you are somewhere on the journey to becoming an adoptive parent or are involved with adoptive parents in some capacity.

The primary purpose of this book is to alert adoptive parents to the emotional turmoil that may lie in store for them following placement of their child, to reassure them that this is a normal part of the process and to provide strategies to help them cope. As an adoptive parent, once you are able to understand and effectively manage your emotions you will be better able to parent a traumatised and potentially challenging child therapeutically, consistently and with love.

The secondary purpose of this book is to share parenting strategies and approaches that have helped others and may also help you as you support your child and help them make progress towards becoming a cherished family member able to achieve their potential.

As an adoptive parent, one of the challenges you may experience is managing your own potentially overwhelming

emotions while at the same time striving to implement parenting strategies that help your child develop, feel secure and attach to you.

This is not a ‘touchy-feely’ book. It is a practical hands-on guide that offers tools and approaches to help you confidently take control of the emotional rollercoaster as well as your child’s development until the highs and lows even out and you enter the realm of a happy, fulfilled and settled life with the new addition to your family firmly ensconced.

Unfortunately, some adoption placements do not work out as successfully as hoped, and either the parents struggle on with conflicting emotions, making little headway with integrating their child into their family, or in extreme cases, the child is handed back into care. When a child is handed back into care, this is called disruption of a placement. Adoption placements disrupt for many reasons including mismanaged expectations, undisclosed or unknown medical conditions and behavioural issues, to name a few. But there are also situations that look like a perfect match where it seems straightforward and the prospective parents appear well prepared, but due to the overwhelming and conflicting emotions that can accompany an adoptive placement, the adoptive parents feel debilitated to the point where disruption of the placement seems the only option.

This book is here to support all adoptive parents as they navigate the challenges of assimilating a ‘looked after child’ into their family to become one of their own. I hope this book will help prevent those instances where the adoption placement should work out but doesn’t.

Through conscious anticipation you will, I hope, be better equipped to deal with the unexpected and powerful emotions that can accompany an adoption placement. By preparing more fully for these emotions, you will be better placed to support your child as they grieve for lost relationships and adapt to new expectations while beginning to feel secure,

with an emerging sense of trust and self-worth, which can pave the way for secure attachments.

Our story

Following eight years of unsuccessful fertility treatment, with everyone around us seemingly able to make babies with no effort, I finally fell pregnant with our son. After having our son, we tried unsuccessfully for a further three years of fertility treatment to conceive another child.

After 11 years focused on trying to have a baby, we decided to get off the fertility treadmill and be happy as a family of three. As content as we were, there was a gap. Both my husband and I wanted another child and our son spoke of wanting a little sister. We decided to look into adoption and we were all excited by the prospect.

After four long years in the adoption process anticipating, dreaming and longing for a daughter for us, a sister for our son and to be a 'forever family' to a little girl who needed a new family, a little girl was placed with us for adoption.

It had been an emotionally exhausting adoption journey for us, yet we were excited, upbeat and ready. Our daughter Lucy was coming; our family would be complete. We had read many adoption-related books and attended numerous courses, we felt totally prepared for Lucy's arrival. Indeed, we were told that we were the best prepared couple the adoption matching panel had ever seen. Life was great and was about to get better!

Within the first few days of Lucy moving in with us, it became apparent that assimilating her into our family was going to be much more challenging than we had anticipated. We had read Lucy's background information through rose-tinted glasses, from a position of optimism, hope and excitement. In reality Lucy's challenges and behaviours were more severe than indicated in her information and the impact on our previously serene life was much bigger than we had anticipated.

We experienced a maelstrom of unanticipated emotions, which in the short term felt threatening, debilitating and caused us some panic. We soon found ourselves feeling overwhelmed and understanding – *really* understanding – why some children placed into families with a view to adoption actually get handed back before the adoption order is made.

The theory we had gleaned from experts through books and courses helped us understand Lucy but hadn't helped us anticipate the conflicting and overwhelming emotions we were experiencing that were so challenging. If we couldn't manage our emotions, putting in place any parenting theory didn't seem possible!

Our challenges with Lucy were significant. Taming our emotions, managing our mind-set and being consistent in our approach with Lucy supported us through the rough patches, to a place of stability where we now find ourselves a happy and settled family. Lucy is settled, our family is settled. Lucy completes our family, we all love her and cannot imagine life without her. Life before Lucy was great – but life now, with Lucy is better.

Following our experience, we learned of many families that experienced anguish in those first few lonely months following the placement of their child. Some of those families pushed through the emotional pain and frustration and are now happily settled as a new family unit with their adopted child well integrated into their family; others, however, ended up with disruption of the placement and handing the child back to the authorities.

Whatever wisdom and advice this book offers has been learned the hard way. When we made mistakes we reflected on what we could have done differently and we adapted. Our biggest lesson is that being an effective parent involves more than just the capacity to 'love'. There are skills that we each

can learn to help us become better parents and to become more emotionally resilient. Parenting is part intuition and gut feel, but there are definite skills and approaches that can be learnt to help you manage situations that you probably can't even imagine at this point. Remember though, there is no such thing as a perfect parent, and it is very easy for us to feel guilty that we could and should be doing better. The fact that you are reading this book already sets you apart as a parent who is willing to consider other ideas and to learn from the experience of others.

I believe that if you consciously parent in a way that helps your child develop the fundamental feelings of trust, attachment, security and self-esteem, you will pave the way for their successful development and so will enable them to have the best chance to become all that they can be.

So whether you are an adoptive parent or a potential adoptive parent, or whether you support the adoption process, children or parents in some other capacity, you may take useful thoughts from this book. I hope to help you better understand the emotional challenges that accompany adoption and to develop some approaches to help you deal with situations you may face.

Meet the children

Over the years, I have spoken with many adoptive parents who have shared some of their adoption related experiences with me. Some of their experiences were really challenging, others much less so. In addition to our daughter Lucy, I have purposely used experiences from five of the families who had the most challenges, to help illustrate some of my thoughts. In all cases, I have changed the names of the children and mixed up some of their experiences, to protect their identity.

Bethany was the youngest of five siblings all taken into care. Her elder siblings were placed in pairs with other

foster families. Bethany witnessed and experienced violent behaviour in her birth family and was mistreated by her elder siblings. Bethany was placed in foster care with different siblings, but none of the combinations worked out, resulting in her moving between foster families a few times. She was eventually placed for adoption without her siblings. Bethany was placed into foster care when she was three years old and arrived at her permanent adoptive placement when she was almost five years old.

Donna experienced serious neglect and malnourishment with her birth family. As she was the first child born to her birth parents, the family was not known to social services, and as a consequence the neglect went undetected until she was two and a half years old, at which point she was removed from their care and placed with a foster family. The birth parents contested the removal and went to parenting classes, determined that Donna should be returned to them. Donna was briefly returned to her birth parents but they were unable to sustain appropriate levels of care for her, so she was returned to foster care with the longer-term plan for adoption. Donna was four and a half when she was placed into an adoptive family.

Jayden was found wandering along the side of a relatively busy road in the countryside. Jayden's family was found to be from a travelling community who were passing through the area. Jayden's parents said that he had wandered off without them noticing. Jayden insists he was made to get out of the car by his daddy. Either way, the events led him to be taken into care. Jayden spent a total of 18 months in foster care with three different foster families. He was placed with his foster family just after his fourth birthday.

Connor and Ben are brothers who were removed from their birth mother at ages three and almost two, respectively. The mother had been known to the authorities since Connor was born as she was struggling to care for him. Once Ben

came along she struggled even more and, despite all the help and support offered to her by the authorities, she was not able to provide a clean and safe home environment for the boys.

Grace was removed from her birth parents at the age of two and a half due to the inability of her parents to recognise the risk to their daughter of leaving her in the care of their extended family. On both sides of the family were uncles and grandparents who had convictions for sexual offences against minors. Both parents had been sexually abused during their childhood by their relatives, were developmentally delayed and unable to recognise the dangers involved with allowing their extended family to look after their daughter. Grace moved into her adoptive home when she was three and a half years old.

How to use this book

This book is split into six parts that will help you anticipate and prepare both emotionally and practically for your new arrival. Each section has a number of chapters, the content of which builds on information previously discussed, so the logical way to read this book is to work your way through from front to back. Each chapter concludes with a summary presented in bulletpoint format with the key messages from the chapter. If you are limited for time, you may choose to read the chapter summaries, and then dip into those chapters that address your immediate need; however, you may miss out on the richness of the content if you use this approach.

If you are in the throes of being matched with a child and the introduction period or arrival of your child is imminent, go straight to Part Six, where there is practical advice on how to actively manage the introductions and the transition of your child into your home and family. Once you have read this section, put aside time as soon as you can to then read through Parts One to Five.

At the end of the book, there is a section on suggestions for further reading and a glossary that explains some of the terms common in the world of adoption, which if you are new to the process may be unfamiliar to you. Any direct references in the text are given in detail at the end of each chapter.

Please note: the term 'parent' can refer to birth parent, foster parent or indeed adoptive parent. As the adoptive parent is the focus of this book, and will most probably be the most active parent in the life of an adopted child, for the purposes of this book if I ever use the term 'parent' as a standalone noun, I am referring to the adoptive parent.

PART ONE

Prepare for the Emotional Journey

Without conscious consideration, it is unlikely you will be prepared to handle the quantity and the variety of emotions that may accompany the placement of your child. Some emotions will challenge you and take you to depths you have not imagined, and there will be others that delight you and give you feelings of unimagined fulfilment. Your adopted child will be experiencing a cocktail of emotions as well. While you are juggling and managing your emotions, you have to find a way to help your child to process theirs while encouraging them to develop feelings of attachment for you. The first few weeks and months may well be the most emotional for all concerned.

CHAPTER 1

Anticipate the Emotional Journey

WARNING: this chapter is brutally honest about what you may feel when your adopted child is placed with you. Please do not be put off by this chapter. The rest of the book will empower you to get through this phase, should you experience it, and into a much happier place.

Having gone through the journey of becoming an adoptive parent, and having spoken to many others, some of whom have succeeded and some who have not, I have come to realise that the enormity of the emotional challenge that accompanies such an undertaking is often underestimated.

My intent with this chapter is to help you become fully aware of the emotional challenges that may lie in wait for you and to help you prepare. I don't want you to be caught unawares as we were, and as a result, stray from one of the most potentially rewarding endeavours of your life.

'Forewarned is forearmed.' With some conscious emotional preparation you will be much better placed to survive the waves of emotion and focus on helping your child settle into your family, so achieving the vision of your family for the future.

You may not be as prepared as you think

The adoption approval process involves a kaleidoscope of emotions and somewhere in the mix, as you attend your matching panel, will be relief that you have finally got this far, excitement about meeting your child, along with some apprehension about the unknown. The predominant feeling that results, however, is generally more positive than negative – which makes sense, otherwise we probably wouldn't continue!

Most first-time adopters don't have children and, therefore, will probably not have had the experience of caring for a child 24/7. Adopters with birth children may assume that their parenting experience will help them parent an adopted child, and in some ways it will. However, parenting an adopted child can be very different to parenting a birth child when dealing with all of the complexities involved, not to mention the additional emotional dynamics that will be present in those families with birth children.

As part of the adoption approval process, you will be asked to anticipate various situations and describe what you might feel or how you might handle these situations. At best, without having experienced the situations before, you can only guess. As long as seemingly well-considered answers are given to the probing questions, the adoption process will swiftly move on. You can answer the question as a theoretical situation without actually having any sense of what it will be like to experience the emotions that go along with the situation. Also, it is human nature to be optimistic and confident and not want to focus too much on the negative feelings for fear that they might make you reconsider your decision to adopt.

It is very easy to get swept up in the practical aspects of the adoption process: the various training courses, the social worker assessment, the initial panel meeting; searching for and finding your child, the matching panel and then planning for the arrival of your child. You will be thinking about the immediate hurdles, and asking yourself: 'What questions might

we get asked at panel?', 'How should we respond?', 'What does the panel want to hear?', 'How can we demonstrate the amount of preparation we have done?', 'Which child will suit us best?', 'What can we learn about the potential challenges our child may face?'

We experienced the adoption approval process to be very thorough in vetting us as suitable parents, but in hindsight it was quite light-touch on helping us prepare for the onslaught of emotions that was waiting for us once our daughter was placed. We had not considered that we may experience challenging, overwhelming and debilitating emotions following the placement of our child. In speaking to many other adoptive families since, I realise we are not alone in our lack of emotional preparation, or the feelings we had once our child arrived.

Keeping busy with the practical demands and the intellectual side of the approval process can leave little space to engage with the potential emotional aspects. Being engulfed in an emotion caused by a situation may bring about different reactions from those you had anticipated when you were simply thinking about what your emotions may be, from the comfort of a detached perspective.

You may feel overwhelmed with mixed emotions

In reality, despite their best efforts, there is no way that social workers can help adoptive parents to anticipate the exact emotions they will feel in response to the placement of their child. What may help, however, is helping potential adopters realise that it is impossible to fully anticipate what life will be like with an adopted child and to appreciate that it is *normal* to experience intense conflicting emotions that may challenge their motivation to continue down the adoption path they have chosen.

Prepare for emotional free-fall

My husband and I considered ourselves thoroughly prepared for the placement of a little girl. We had read lots of books, been on many training courses and, already having a son, we felt confident in our parenting. We felt more than ready. Yet only two weeks into the placement we had never felt so unready for anything in our entire lives! We started drowning in a sea of emotions that we just had not anticipated. We had thought through just about every scenario we might face and had planned how to handle all of them – in that regard we were very prepared. However, we were taken by surprise by the potency of the cocktail of emotions that accompanied handling the situations about which we had only theorised.

We felt a scramble of emotions in the weeks after our daughter arrived, in which we flipped between positive and negative, resourceful and unresourceful, fulfilled and depressed. The emotions could change from hour to hour or day to day. My husband and I could experience the same emotion at the same time, in which case the impact was magnified, or we could be at completely different ends of the emotional spectrum, which caused tension. My husband, our son and I all experienced our daughter differently and, therefore, had different associated feelings generated by our responses. We also experienced emotions as a response to each other's reactions to our daughter. So there were layers upon layers of emotions that we had not anticipated and so many feelings flying around that it was exhausting.

While feeling hopeful for, and protective of Lucy, we were at the same time hugely protective of and worried for our son and the huge impact that the situation was having on his life. We felt angry with the care system that had allowed her to languish in foster care for far too long and angry at her birth family for subjecting her to awful early life experiences, the results of which we were now seeing on a daily basis.

At night after we had managed to settle our daughter to bed, waves of panic would engulf us as we realised the enormity of the challenge we had taken on, not to mention the potential impact of the decision we had made, on us, our son and our family as a whole.

We had spent so many years preparing for adoption intellectually and progressing steadily through the adoption approval process, that at some level we had expected our family to expand and absorb a new member with minimal pain. When speaking with friends and family we had been excited and upbeat and they had been excited for us. We had dwelled only on the positives, so when the challenges came, although we had discussed them hypothetically, the reality of the emotional onslaught that accompanied them was almost overwhelming and we felt isolated and lonely.

None of the adoptive parents that we had spoken to during our preparation had ever mentioned experiencing the challenging emotions that were so prevalent for us. We were very confused. We felt that we were alone in experiencing these emotions and that maybe the adoption placement wasn't progressing as it should. We realise now that it is not uncommon to feel overwhelmed by the onslaught of emotions following the placement of a child. Had we realised this at the time, we would have been more prepared and reassured that this overwhelming state was only temporary.

Your emotions may be more intense if you have a birth child

Not everyone feels overwhelmed but there is an increased chance that you will do if you already have birth children and are planning to adopt a child from the care system. The natural instinct is to protect your family unit, especially

existing children, from negative influences and harm. If the child you choose to adopt is particularly challenging in the early weeks, you may feel an overwhelming urge to protect your existing family unit.

Your first experience of having a child may have been uncomplicated, you may have fallen in love with your child at first sight, and from the moment you met them you would have gladly laid down your life for them. This may not be so for your adopted child.

Our emotions almost got the better of us

We had an expectation that we would fall in love with our adopted daughter at first sight, and that we would feel the same intensity of love for her that we did for our son. In hindsight this seems completely unrealistic and naive, but none of the adoption preparation modules led us to think about what we might feel for our adopted daughter when we first met, so we had assumed it would be love at first sight, which it wasn't. Added to all of the other challenging emotions, we felt guilty for not loving this little girl straight away, we were convinced she deserved better.

Add into this mix our little boy, seven years old, who was thrust into the middle of a tornado of emotions and challenging behaviours. In hindsight he was coping excellently, far better than my husband and I, but in the early weeks we wanted to make his life simple and calm again.

At times, we felt depressed, isolated with our emotions, guilty for having negative feelings and ashamed that although we thought we were thoroughly prepared, in reality we weren't coping emotionally. Lucy was four years old when she arrived at our home. She was confused and missed her foster carers so much that we also felt guilty for having taken her away from them.

We almost managed to convince ourselves that our daughter would be happier back with her foster family than being adopted by us!

Feeling overwhelmed is natural

In the midst of our emotional turmoil, we reached out to the adoptive parents with whom we had spoken during our adoption preparation, especially those with birth children. We were hugely reassured to hear that many of them had experienced all the overwhelming feelings that we were experiencing! The panic, the confusion, the guilt – all of it! Apparently it is a natural part of the process that some people experience – but no one had thought to mention it to us.

We wish we had known. I believe we would have felt much better prepared for the reality if we had known such feelings were a possibility. We would have taken reassurance from knowing that what we were experiencing was a normal part of the process and it would have removed an element of the feeling of panic that we found so debilitating, not to mention exhausting.

We understood intellectually that our family would have to stretch and grow to accommodate another child. What we hadn't fully appreciated was the discomfort that we would have to endure as our family unit adapted to include another child. Stretching your emotions to absorb another human being into your life and family, especially a child rather than a baby, and especially if you already have children, is a huge undertaking. Like childbirth, the process can hurt, but it is absolutely worth it!

Be reassured – you can tame the overwhelming feelings!

We recognised that we were feeling stressed, overwhelmed and panicked, and while feeling those emotions we were not able to think clearly. We knew we had to tame our emotions, and so we consciously took control of our mind and emotions in four ways.

1. When we felt frustrated, we consciously accessed compassion instead. We reminded ourselves that at the centre of this turmoil was a little girl who had asked for none of this; she just had the misfortune to be born to a family ill-prepared to meet her needs, where she remained far longer than she should have done, and then was moved to live with foster carers who loved her and looked after her, but had not provided structure or encouraged her development. Our daughter was very much the product of her experiences to date and presented as a four-year-old toddler when she was placed with us. We realised that any frustration we felt in response to this little girl's behaviour was not originally of her making and this enabled us to feel compassionate towards her, rather than frustrated in response to her.
2. When we felt overwhelmed we imagined a future where we had given up and handed this little girl back to the care system. We imagined how we would feel, what our son would think and feel. We anticipated we would feel forever sad and regretful of the events and of the negative impact that we would have had on an already blighted life. We also realised that from that future perspective the current experiences we were finding so challenging and overwhelming wouldn't seem so bad. We realised that being in the 'thick of it' was awful, but getting some perspective and looking in on it from the outside – momentarily it didn't seem quite as bad.

These brief emotional respites were like a miracle tonic and gave us the energy to dig deep and carry on.

3. When the future looked bleak, we consciously created a strong, positive, fulfilling, inspiring and engaging vision about how great our life would be when we had succeeded. We mentally painted our vision of the future of our happy family, with our daughter well settled, all relationships positive and how fulfilling and rewarding our lives would be when we were all settled. We discussed it, shared it and allowed this to create new and more resourceful feelings that inspired us to continue.
4. When we questioned what we were doing, we reminded ourselves of the reasons we wanted to adopt a little girl. We reflected on what we hoped to achieve for her, for our son and for ourselves. We found that checking in regularly with the motivation behind our decisions re-energised us, filled us with hope and gave us the determination to continue.

These four conscious interventions helped us regain control of our emotions and gave us the strength and fortitude to continue. They may also help you. We referred to these four steps frequently.

Making progress and growing together

So we continued day by day, hour by hour and sometimes interaction by interaction. Progress was slow at first, with any semblance of normal family life seeming an ever-moving target. But little by little, together we made progress as we all learned to live together and to love each other. Our daughter changed a lot as she grew to trust us and to attach to us, and as a family unit we changed as well, as we integrated our daughter and became a family unit of four.

Now, three years on, our life is as rewarding and as fulfilling as we hoped it would be. We adore our daughter, she completes our family and we cannot imagine life without her. It scares us to think that had we not been so resilient and determined to succeed, the negative feelings that overwhelmed us *may* have caused us to give up and hand our daughter back to the care system.

We are in the position now of fully understanding that all of the challenging emotions and feelings of panic we had in the early weeks and months were a normal part of the process, and that the approach we took in helping our daughter settle and progress worked for us.

It's natural to have initial regrets

Having been through the adoption process and run the gamut of emotions from beginning to end, going in as a happy family of three and coming out as a fabulous family of four, and having spoken to many adoptive parents who have also gone through the emotional turmoil and emerged at the other side more positive, I have some reassuring news for you. To feel these challenging mixed emotions is to be human. It is completely natural and normal to:

- question the sanity of your decision to adopt
- wish at times that you hadn't entered into the adoption process
- yearn for your old uncomplicated life
- feel panicked and overwhelmed
- worry that you may never love your child.

Many more positive emotions are waiting for you once you weather the initial emotional storm, as is a hugely rewarding and immensely enjoyable life with your adopted child. Feelings of amusement, fondness, caring, worry, admiration, respect, awe and love, as well as many other positive and rewarding emotions will come with time.

Let's break the taboo

As it is so normal to feel the emotional overwhelm, I am confused as to why it is such a taboo subject. The more we can talk about it as being normal, the more we could offer support to those people in the midst of overwhelming feelings, and the more those people would feel supported as they navigated successfully through the challenges to the other side.

As adoptive parents, we strive for many years to achieve our goal of having a child placed with us for adoption. We have been enthusiastic and upbeat to our friends who have supported us through the process. We have been diligent and strong to prove to the social workers that we are fit parents to handle the complications of parenting a child from the care system. To then admit to feeling overwhelmed, panicked and fearful may feel like admitting a huge weakness and admitting that we feel like a failure.

It would help break the taboo if anyone involved in the preparation and support of adoptive families could encourage the discussion of feelings more openly. This might make it easier for adoptive families to share their true feelings. If it were naturally part of the discussion regarding what they may expect, adoptive parents would know that whatever they are feeling is probably appropriate and that the only way is forwards. Once adoptive families share their true feelings, it would be easier to help them find the support they need. They may just need someone to talk to, who can reassure them that what they are feeling is natural.

Disruption due to overwhelming emotions

One couple I spoke to had a six-year-old birth daughter and had a three-year-old boy placed with them for adoption. This little boy had no significant issues, was meeting all of his milestones and had come from a supportive foster care family. All was set to go smoothly.

However, the sense of doubt and panic started during the introduction process and persisted into the first week of the little boy moving in. Their birth daughter and the little boy seemed to get on very well, but the adoptive mother felt resentment of the time her husband got to spend with their daughter while she was playing with and taking care of the little boy. Soon both the adoptive mum and her husband were feeling an intense mixture of confusing emotions that they were struggling to sort out. They felt guilty as they didn't instantly love the little boy, and couldn't ever imagine loving him in the same way they loved their birth daughter. They didn't know what they wanted, didn't understand what they were feeling and couldn't see an end to feeling overwhelmed.

When the little boy had been with them for almost two weeks, they were in the thick of the emotional overload, didn't feel able to think straight, couldn't sort out the negative emotions that had taken them by surprise and they asked for the little boy to be taken back into care.

Months later the mother was still reeling from the experience, and was wondering what had gone wrong. In hindsight she couldn't remember the intensity of the overwhelming emotions, and questions whether they made the correct decision in handing the little boy back. She feels that as a family they could have persevered, sought help and worked through the emotions.

The whole situation above is regretful and damaging both to the adoptive family and to the little boy, who may now be harder to place as he has one failed placement behind him.

Create space for additional stress in your life

Adoption is a life-changing experience, for you as well as your adopted child, and it is not going to be 'stress free'. Anticipate that there will be some stress introduced into your life by your new bundle of joy! As human beings, we can cope with quite a lot of stress but not infinite levels. Listen to your social workers when they advise you to minimise the other stressors that you have in your life at the time of placement and for the next few months. Create some capacity in your life for some extra stress.

Also be aware that you never know what is round the corner! When our daughter was placed with us, I was due to take a year off work and be a stay-at-home mum until she started school. However, two months after she arrived, my husband's work situation changed and, as a consequence, I went back to work part-time. You never know when your personal situation will change or a loved one may get sick; life is full of surprises good and bad.

One adoptive mum I spoke to had the tragic situation of her own father being diagnosed with cancer two days after a sibling group was placed with her. She and her family then had to cope with her father's rapid decline and death six weeks after her children moved in.

It really is important to pay attention to the stressors in your life and to minimise and control what you can, so that you have bags of extra capacity for your new arrival and any unforeseen circumstances that may crop up.

Disruption due to escalating stress

I spoke to another couple who had two school age birth children and had a two-year-old girl placed with them for adoption. They explained that as they had little control over the timing of the arrival of the little girl, and against the advice of their social worker, they felt they had no choice but to continue with their house renovation, which started soon after she moved in.

The mother was also juggling part-time work, school runs, after school clubs and homework of their birth children. The father was managing a stressful job as well as continuing with other commitments that took him out of the house a few evenings a week. Much of the stress of managing the little girl fell to the adoptive mum.

The relationship became strained between the husband and wife and eventually there was too much stress to cope with, the placement disrupted and the little girl was handed back into care after 10 months with the family, never having been officially adopted. A year on and the adopted mum still regretted the whole chain of events and, in hindsight, acknowledged that they didn't create the necessary space to accommodate the addition of another person to their family by reducing their other stressors.

In order that you are able to give the levels of physical and emotional energy to meet the needs of your adopted child in the early months you do need to find ways to reduce the other stressors in your life and recharge your own batteries. Don't feel selfish, put time aside for you. Go out with your friends occasionally, build in time to go for a run or a walk, or whatever it is that is just for you. Identify whatever it is that continues to make you feel normal and be sure to build it into

your life. You may consider it a challenge to achieve this, but you may find life more of a challenge if you don't.

The adopters with whom I spoke all mentioned how important they consider it to have some respite in terms of time to go the gym, for a run/walk or to visit with friends. Not all managed to achieve it, but all felt it was extremely important. Some suggested getting a trusted babysitter early on that can step in and help out to give you real time off. All these activities were considered essential in managing stress, emotions and helping build reserves of patience. Not all of the adopters with whom I spoke did get precious respite time, but those who didn't, wished in hindsight that they'd planned for it.

Ask for help

There may be times of the day after your child has moved in when you feel your energy and your patience are at their lowest, you feel at your least resourceful and you may wish you had some extra help. If this is the case, ask for it. It may be that your emotions are bubbling out of control and you simply need some help in the form of someone to talk to. Ask your friends and family to listen. You may just need a couple of hours' break to take a walk, do some exercise or simply have a cup of tea. Ask your friends and family to be with your child to give you a break. You will have identified people to be in your support network for a reason; you'll need their help, ask them; they'll want to help, let them.

My low-energy time

I quickly became aware of my 'times of low energy', soon after my husband returned to work following his two-week adoption leave. With my husband at work and my son at school I was

alone all day with Lucy, managing her behaviour, anticipating and meeting her needs and helping her to learn to trust me. After parenting Lucy all day on my own, and having done the school runs, after school clubs and homework with our son, by the time the children's bedtime came around I was wrung out emotionally and physically.

Bedtime was initially a tricky time for Lucy, she didn't like being left alone and she missed the familiarity of her foster carers. I quickly became aware that I didn't have the necessary energy reserves at that time of day to meet her needs in the way that she desperately needed and deserved. After some fraught evenings of challenging behaviour and tears – mine as well as hers – my husband managed to rearrange his work commitments to get home in time for the bath and bedtime routine and attend to our daughter's needs with energy reserves that I just didn't have left at that time of the day.

For us this worked really well, and over a period of a few weeks my husband managed to bring down Lucy's angst around bedtime to levels that I could cope with given the energy reserves I had left at the end of the day. At the same time, the structure and nurturing I was providing during the day resulted in the days being less demanding, and so I was able to parent effectively throughout the day from dawn until dusk and still have enough energy left for our son after Lucy had gone to bed.

If you don't have the additional support immediately to hand, for example, if you are a single adopter, then make sure you prepare your support network to lend a hand or be at the end of the phone when you need it. It is essential to have some form of physical and/or emotional support to help you cope during that portion of the day when you have less energy, less patience and are feeling emotionally drained. Don't wait until you can't cope before you ask for help – enlist the help before

it gets that far. Don't wait until you are exhausted to sit down and take a break. Force yourself to sit down when you can for a few minutes here and there to let your batteries recharge. Sometimes you may not need practical support, you may just need a friendly ear to offload to.

Ten friendly ears

Once every couple of months five friends and I try to meet up for dinner. The scheduled day for our next dinner happened to be two weeks to the day after Lucy had moved in. I was determined to go, despite the whirlwind occurring in our home. I was a little late as I wanted to know that Lucy was settled in bed before I left. When I arrived to the restaurant my five friends were deep in discussion and enjoying catching up with each other.

When they saw me arrive all conversation stopped as they waited eagerly to hear my news. They had heard nothing from me since the day of the matching panel and they knew that Lucy had moved in two weeks ago and they were eager to hear how it was going. I was struck by the normality of the scene: my five friends and I, having a regular and fun catch up. But it wasn't the same – my world had changed in a major way – my life was so different now from the way it had been just a few weeks before. I had walked into a pocket of normality and I wanted to hang on to it for a little bit longer, and so I encouraged them to continue with their conversations and I just sat at the edge of the discussions and observed.

Soon though, their current conversations had run their course and all eyes turned to me. I knew what they wanted to hear: that it was wonderful, all was going well and smoothly, that we adored Lucy, we felt blessed, it was easy, life was great – but I couldn't. When one of my friends finally asked me how it was going, I could find no words and so I simply burst into tears.

Once I'd sobbed for a minute or two, I explained how overwhelmed I was feeling, how I had no time for my son, how my emotions were all mixed up and how Lucy was such hard work, and how exhausted I was. My friends listened, and they listened some more. Finally, when I had run out of things to say, they shared their own stories about how overwhelmed they felt when they had their first and then second, sometimes third and fourth child. How emotional, how conflicted, sometimes resentful they felt, and of how hard it was for them too. I knew that their challenges were different to mine but they were still challenges, exhausting emotional challenges, and having them all listen to me and then share their stories really helped.

After I had given vent to my feelings of exhaustion and conflicting emotions I found myself talking about Lucy, how brave she was, how much she had been through in her short life, what this change of family must be like for her, her little quirks, and how she had on occasion made us laugh, and actually some of the positive changes we had already seen in her behaviour. I found myself taking a different perspective and feeling protective and compassionate and proud of this new little girl who had turned our life upside down.

For a few hours that evening I'd stepped back into normality, reconnected with some friends, managed to broaden my perspective and got strength to continue. That evening was like a tonic, I returned home feeling less isolated, more balanced and knowing that I was not the only person to feel challenging emotions in response to the arrival of a child, no matter where they had come from!

Summary

- ★ Although it is not much talked about, welcoming another child with challenges into your home will create

a whirlwind of emotions that it is almost impossible to predict. Although the adoption preparation process will have helped prepare you a little, it is easy to pay lip service to the emotional preparation, to think you are prepared and only realise you are unprepared when the onslaught of challenging emotions hits you after your child has moved in.

- ★ Some people ride the wave of challenging emotions until they enter calmer waters, other people consider that it is abnormal and take it as a sign that the adoption placement is not meant to be, and so wheels are put in motion that can lead to disruption of the placement. In all cases, better emotional anticipation and expectation will help prepare you for situations that you will then be better able to handle.
- ★ Feeling overwhelmed by the reality of assimilating another child into your life is completely normal. Even more so, when the child in question has had negative life experiences and has not been fully nurtured. Expecting to feel overwhelmed, and having plans in place with how to cope with this, would help reduce the feelings of frustration, and ease the journey through the overwhelming emotions into stability.
- ★ Strive to access compassion rather than frustration. Imagine how you will feel in the future if you do give up. When you look back to now from the future, will it really seem as bad as it seems now? Develop a bright and compelling vision of your family's future, which includes your adopted child. Cling onto this vision and the belief that it can happen. Remind yourselves of the reasons you wanted to adopt originally. Feel the desire to adopt. Don't allow your original motivations to be obliterated by the current maelstrom of emotions.

- ★ Creating space in your life for additional stress; recognising that these feelings of panic and overwhelm are quite normal; and getting support from family and friends, social services and other people that have been through similar experiences will help you get through the rough emotional waters and into the calm.
- ★ Realise that you may have less energy and patience than needed at certain times to meet the demands of parenting your adopted child. Build in some respite or some support to help you cope with these times.
- ★ Don't isolate yourself in your home for the months after your child arrives, make time in the early weeks to reconnect with normal situations outside your home and with friends – you will draw strength from reconnecting with the outside world.