

## ADOPTING OLDER CHILDREN

These are the children that are hardest to find homes for and the biggest group languishing on adoption registers around the UK.

Talking, walking little people, they are aware more than any baby or toddler that they have been cut adrift and rejected. They are emotionally traumatized and tagged ‘hard to place’ by professionals floating in and out of their lives. Having spent their short lives being uprooted and let down, they instinctively trust no one. They are old enough to have clear memories and confused loyalties. Abuse and rejection have resulted in a chronic lack of self-esteem, and these children carry a heavy load of emotional baggage that will be unravelled in the years to come on your living-room floor and that you and they will have to sort through.

Care of these traumatized small people can be counter-intuitive: they need time in when they do something unacceptable, not time out. They don’t need to be told to ‘grow up’ and be a big girl or boy when they fall over literally or figuratively, they need to be allowed to regress to the early days they probably never had and learn how to accept a hug, and sometimes they need to be taught how to ‘play’.

‘I can’t remember specific instances of cuddling and comforting my birth children, but the day our adopted son first allowed me to comfort him is fresh in my mind,’ wrote one adoptive father. ‘He’d been with us for around seven months and he fell off a chair. For the first time ever he snuggled in for a few moments when I picked him up. The “Aww” factor was enormous.

‘Even better was the day over two years into placement, when he asked if he could give me a hug. At last this hurt, frightened, alienated little creature was able to do something that comes so naturally to most children.’

Adoptions of older children are those most likely, except in certain abusive circumstances, to be open adoptions where the children the adopter is trying to nurture are constantly reminded, sometimes for good and sometimes not, of their birth family, at the very least by letter contact and for others with regular arranged meetings. For some, despite all the love and support offered by an adoptive parent, they suffer from a divided sense of loyalty, wanting against all the odds and all the abusive evidence to defend the parents who gave birth to them.

But those who have adopted older children successfully say that the unhappy awareness of their circumstances is not always as much of a disadvantage as it is perceived to be. 'Harder to place doesn't necessarily mean harder to parent,' said one adopter. The longer road to finding a stable, secure, forever family can also result in an active willingness to make an adoption work.

If adopters and adoptees are well matched, the rewards for all can be enormous. Children blossom and grow, physically and emotionally, and begin to take pride in themselves where once they had none. Transformations of all kinds can and do take place.

## Hard to place?

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**My son Simba is 11: this Saturday is our fourth anniversary. He was rising eight when he came home, so quite old in adoption terms and considered 'hard to place'. We didn't have any great difficulty bonding, but I think that's partly down to us being a very good match; we have lots of similar interests, for example, and had lots to share. One advantage of adopting an older child was that he understood more and was very ready for a mummy.**

So what is our life like? In many ways it's fairly average. Simba is doing well, holding his own in a small mainstream secondary. He has made some nice friends. He adores his nanny and grandad, and they think the world of him. He goes to Scouts and Woodcraft Folk. He has tennis lessons, is a member of the athletics club, he swims like a fish. Yes, he is sports mad! Yes, he likes his iPad and Wii as well. He helps on the allotment. In the last four years we have been every year on holiday to Cornwall, we have camped in Gambia, ridden camels

in the Sahara in Morocco. We go to the theatre, cinema and concerts. He loves a party and a boogie.

So why was he hard to place? He was seven when I saw his profile, he is a boy, he has ASD and a mild learning difficulty. He is dual heritage. After I expressed an interest in him, the local authority put him in *Children Who Wait*. In three months there was not one single enquiry about him. My gain: I have an amazing son.

I do think it was important that, although he was at school, when he came to be part of my family I took a full year of adoption leave. The long summer holiday together was really important. I didn't have to use any childcare. I was available all the time after school and at weekends. I was able to attend every single event at school. This helped bonding and gave me lots of time for that positive influence stuff because I wasn't running around frazzled between job, housework, shopping and him. We spent literally hours just cuddled on the sofa in the evenings, or whole days at the weekend playing board games and doing jigsaws, because I could, knowing I had the weekdays free to do all the other stuff.

And now? It's not all roses. Simba is very anxious; there is a deep underlying grief and sadness. His behaviour can be very 'challenging' as they say. The ASD means all those holidays and trips need huge amounts of preparation. We don't do surprises. He likes his routines. I am single but I do work three days a week and it's just about manageable. Thanks to the Adoption Support Fund, we have just started fairly hefty therapy which will take a year.

Chances are that many people looking for young, easy-to-place children are going to end up with many of the issues we have anyway. I had the advantage of being fully aware of his issues. He arrived with a diagnosis, a statement and in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA). Many people who adopt babies and toddlers will end up having to fight for these things.

I'd really encourage any prospective adopter to look beyond the labels, at the child that lies behind. I wish the description 'hard to place' could be banned. My son is no harder to parent than many of those easy-to-place children.

The right match is key. For both of us, it's been the right thing. I have a wonderful, amazing son, and he isn't languishing in long-term foster care. Despite all the challenges, we have built a good life. We

are happy, we are a family. Which, after all, is what this is all about, isn't it?

## Never give up?

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Kyle is a kind, funny, articulate and creative young man. I was told it was 'too late' for him academically at five years old because he had missed so much in his early years. He has just completed the first year of college and left school with 10+ good GCSEs. He wrote this poem about some of the things he still finds very challenging – feeling safe, secure and at peace – and how troubled his mind is when he struggles to switch off in order to eventually get some sleep.

### NOTHING AND EVERYTHING

*Like thousands of unsettled butterflies they float around,  
Dodging thought clouds and overcoming any thought  
of sanity or salvation,  
Things that have not been told, things that are never thought  
drift across my now sleepy state,  
The guard has been given up and the foes  
are attacking the mind.  
Glass shatters and the shards reverberate  
inside my now hollow head,  
This continuous loop of breakages perplexes  
my now wide awake mind,  
And how can the night make subtle thoughts unbearable?  
Everything breaks up in a dreamlike state,  
Immense worries become thousands of fluttering creatures,  
Whereas the smallest inkling of negative thought  
grows and increases till it breaks,  
And the loop of broken thoughts starts again.*

## Looking back – an adoptee's story

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**Having met my adoptive family at the age of seven, there are some things that I wish they had known. These things may apply to all adopters too.**

One of these things is that I don't like change; I was in and out of care from the ages of three to four and again from five to seven, until I was finally adopted officially at age nine. This, for me, makes it almost impossible to trust adults and their decision-making skills. Another effect of this is also making secure and long-term attachments with the adults that are my parents.

Another thing is that I didn't like sharing attention. I was adopted with my three siblings. We are still a family unit, but in trying to get my parents' attention, I'd usually revert back to silly behaviours, such as climbing on things, slamming my door, shouting at my siblings and general rudeness. I wouldn't mind how I got my parents' attention, just as long as I had it.

Third, when meeting my adoptive extended family, it was really weird meeting them, because as far as I was aware, I might be moved at any moment. I love my grandma, grandad and all my aunts and uncles and cousins and step-grandparents but, meeting them, I was overwhelmed at the prospect that this was my new family, and that I wasn't going back to my birth mother.

One thing that I found useful was the service from Family Futures. This therapy really helped me with my relationships with my parents and to realize that I am not going back. One particular thing that helped me most of all was the video of my biological mother answering questions that we (my siblings and I) had sent her. She lied consistently throughout the video, and I realized how much of a waste of time she really was. She will always be the one who brought me into the world, so my feelings towards her will always be very complicated.

Of course there will be stressful times, but among those there will be times of immense happiness. I am now 15 and struggling with all the normal things that teenagers have to deal with, as well as the legacy of my past. When you grow up in a traumatic household, it actually affects your ability to plan ahead. I don't make excuses for myself, but these are reasons why I find it hard to understand consequences. In our family, we're struggling through a really tough

time at the moment. I have returned home after 12 weeks of Section 20 care and am adjusting back into family life.

In those 12 weeks, I learnt that every family has different ways of functioning and coping with everyday life, and you know what? I think I prefer my family just the way it is. What I would like adopters to know is that it's going to be tough, but love makes a difference. I was doing some creative work in a therapy session, and then I thought of this: 'Love lifts off masks we fear we cannot live without, but know we cannot live within.'

## **Keeping on the right track**

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**When I adopted my beautiful daughter, she was eight years old. She is feisty and a bundle of issues, but it was a match that surprised us both with the closeness that would develop over time. Ever since the adoption day, we have marked each year with a special time together, exchanging gifts and cards and having a day together.**

Each year I would have a message or a letter in the card. These became increasingly loving and thoughtful as we became closer and closer. But I have to say I was absolutely blown away when I received this poem for the last adoption day. I am in awe and feel particularly humbled by the way my daughter was able to express herself with these beautiful words just for me. However bumpy times get and however tricky things become between us, I still carry this poem around with me – I think I will always carry it around. I find it hard to read it aloud and on the occasions I have shared it, I will usually cry. See what you think:

**POEM FOR MUMMA**

*There comes a time in every life when trials fill the soul  
And all around no help is seen as heartaches take their toll.  
Nowhere it seems (that) can she escape  
whose life is plagued with hurt  
And the pains that fill that life of gloom, no joys can come to avert  
When all around on every hand only struggles can be found  
And through that life would like to sing,  
the heart seems chained and bound  
Downward ever falling, that life would soon lose hope  
Distresses seem to hang that life at the end of no small rope.  
But in that time I rebelled, when my heart was cold and black  
I seemed to feel a loving touch, t'was a hand upon my back  
And when I looked to see whose hand was extended in my aid  
I saw a loving woman with no profits to be made.  
The love of life reached deep within and made my heart anew.  
I honestly don't know why you picked crazy wild me  
Out of all the different girls that you did see  
Mature, simple, kind  
But you never did seem to mind  
So I thank you now mother  
For sticking with me these past eight years  
Even though you tend to smother  
You always seem to deter my tears  
Now that I'm regrown I can understand  
Why there is such a high demand  
To adopting kids  
Because all the parents want to be like you  
They want to rescue kids amid all that trouble  
And be their knight in shining armour  
Live life with no regrets,  
Now thanks to you, now I will*

## The light of our lives

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**David was adopted when he was seven years old after a traumatic early childhood. When he was 17, friends and family nominated him to be at Olympic torch bearer.**

Although the rain barely let up and coats and jeans were the order of the day, David looked the part in his white sporting outfit as he walked down the stairs of the little hotel we stayed in before his run. He made a good job of showing off his outfit round the local punters who admired his gear and he was busily telling them that the whole thing was luck. Hmmm...

In a moment of sun, I nipped out with him to remind him that his run was far from luck. People chose to nominate him and he got picked out because he got mentioned a lot and because he had such an inspirational story. David looked down and shuffled his feet a little. 'He doesn't feel worth it even now,' I thought. I twigged. I gave him a £2 coin for a snack just in case (food is number one on this lad's list when he gets anxious – starvation has a long legacy...). I began to worry once more if this was just a step too far for David. Could he hold it together? Would he run off and his post-traumatic stress disorder be triggered?

We got in the car, found a vantage place and waited. After two hours David and the procession came by. To our delight, David's adopted sister came along to see him too and we all cheered and waved excitedly despite the rain. When he went past me, I can hardly describe the feeling of overwhelming, powerful love that came over me. David's dad and his grandparents, aunt and friends all came to support him despite the foul weather and the wait – but it was so worth it. Such an achievement for him. Such an achievement for all of us.

Last year, David got into the county trials and at the age of 16 missed the nationals by one place. Being a traumatized youngster, rejection hits him extremely hard.

'When I'm running, well, the thing is I feel alive, truly alive and nothing else matters then,' says David.

He had several months of difficulty following the trials, but being such a sporty lad, having done so well from not being able to hold a pen to a handful of GCSEs and presenting so well, numerous friends and family nominated him to be a torch bearer.

His big day was his chance to show the nation that a young lad with a poor early start is really someone rather impressive. We are so proud of our lad and were so honoured to share his chance to shine.

## Celebrating

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**We adopted our daughter Emily three years ago when she was four. Now aged seven, we know that as well as a severe attachment disorder she has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).**

I have type 1 diabetes and have had this condition since I was a child. Over the years, I've explained to Emily what it means and that I have an insulin pump, but she hasn't taken much notice of how I deal with things. She has seen me eat sweets and have low blood sugar, but she has never appeared that interested. We've also explained that she should dial 999 if I'm in a bad way – for example, if I'm sleepy, shaky or if I faint. Again, probably as part of her severe attachment issues, she's dismissed it and doesn't seem to want to know.

In March I came home with her after school and told her I didn't feel very well. Unfortunately, when my blood sugar goes low, I get very confused and don't know that I need sugar, and I can often argue and refuse help. I went upstairs and collapsed into convulsions and don't remember much else until I eventually came around with my daughter shoving sweets into my mouth. She had a bottle of Lucozade too and kept shouting at me, 'Wake up, Mummy, don't sleep...' Sleep is exactly what I shouldn't do! I drank the Lucozade and she helped me to eat the sweets when the phone rang. I was too weak to get the phone, so my daughter picked up the receiver and said, 'Yes, my mummy is talking and awake now.' She had phoned 999 and they were calling back to see how things were and to say that the paramedics were on their way.

I have tears in my eyes as I write this. My dear daughter is a lot younger than her years. She is a child with a disability who struggles every day of her life to cope with the stresses of school and everyday living that we all take for granted. I feel sick to the stomach that I put her in that awful situation...another trauma. She remembered everything we had told her, she found sugar and she called for help. She is terrified of the police and ambulances from previous experiences, so to call them was remarkable! She is a star and I am very proud of her!