

ADOPTION FACT SHEET

So you have given the matter thought, and decided that adoption may well be for you and you have an idea of what sort of child you would like to adopt.

There are a number of stages you will go through:

Contacting an Agency

Most of these agencies are local Social Services departments with social workers specialising in adoption work. Every adoption agency will have a slightly different approach to the adoption procedure, but all will be governed by the legal aspects, such as age (the minimum is 21) and how long you have been married or living with your partner. Most agencies like you to have been together for at least three years.

Information Pack

Usually the next step is to be sent an information pack. This will give you details about what to expect during the adoption procedure and will also explain some of the difficulties you may encounter should you go ahead with an adoption.

If you still want to proceed, the next stage will be a home study.

The Home Study

This is the part of adoption which can cause the most anguish because of the in-depth nature of the home assessment. You will be asked details about your circumstances and at some point you will have to give your consent for your police records to be checked, which will include details of any offence, even if it was many years ago. You will also have to participate in some preparation training, often known as 'The Adoption Triangle', looking at adoption from all sides. You will be asked to talk about your respective families, background, health and financial matters but this is to ensure you are prepared for any problems you may encounter. You will be visited on several occasions, both as a couple and individually.

Form F

This is the official form that all social workers are required to complete and eventually present to the Adoption Panel. The first part of Form F is basic information about you i.e. your religion, language, age and work. There will also be a section for your home details and the surrounding neighbourhood. The most important part is about the type of child you are looking for. Your social worker will have discussed the age range suitable for you and asked whether you would consider a child with physical or mental disabilities or a history of abuse. It is very important to be totally honest when answering these types of questions and to know your limitations.

The form will also have references. These are usually from three people well known to you, one of whom can be a family member. In addition, there will be statutory references from the police and probation services and also a comprehensive health report.

The second part of the form is a more subjective report, which will usually include a profile of each applicant. This covers present and previous relationships, background, education, employment, interests and motivations to be an adopter. Another factor taken into consideration is your support network such as family and friends, neighbours etc, and

also your lifestyle, whether you like the outdoor life or prefer a more cultural leaning.

The home study is much more than checking to see whether you have the right sort of house or enough money. It looks at you as a couple and as individuals. It considers your strengths and weaknesses and helps you to think deeply about the sort of child who would fit into your life.

Adoption Panel

The Form F is presented to an Adoption Panel who usually meet once a month and will spend about half an hour considering each application. In the past, prospective adopters were not invited to the panel but now many applicants are able to attend the meeting so that they can be given an opportunity to contribute. If your application reaches this stage, the chances are it will succeed - only about six percent fail at this stage because most unsuitable applicants will have been screened out of the process earlier. The panel can only make recommendations to an agency. It is then the agency that has the responsibility for making the final decision.

Being Matched with a Child

The agonising selection procedure is over and there will be huge sighs of relief, but in some ways the hardest part has yet to come...

The next stage involves the delicate process of matching you with a suitable child. This will depend largely on the age you have been approved for. The older the child, the shorter your wait is likely to be. It could be weeks, months or at worst years but the upside of that is that, when it happens, it will be right for all of you.

Meeting your Child

Once you have been matched, you will get the chance to meet the child and talk to the people who have been caring for them, usually a foster parent. The first meeting will be at the carer's home but there will be a gradual build-up of visits and overnight stays to enable you and your child to bond together. If everything goes well, your child will come to live with you, although at this stage they will not have been formally adopted by you. They must have lived with you for 19 weeks before you can proceed to the next stage.

Adoption Order

You can apply for an adoption order as soon as the child starts to live with you but the application may take up to three months to process, and you cannot apply to adopt a newborn baby until they are six weeks old. The adoption hearing is usually a brief affair in a judge's chambers. You and the child may be asked some questions and the decision is made there and then. After the adoption order is made, the child is legally yours and you officially have parental responsibility. Now you start on a new journey, making a life together with your new family.

Elaine's Story

Well, that's the easy part – telling you about the procedure you will go through, but no-one can tell you how you will react to the many issues that will be raised during the process. My husband Martin and I decided to adopt after IVF treatment and a miscarriage. Once we had made the decision, we were both fully committed to it and, as hard as it may sound, we felt that at least with adoption we would get something at the end of it all!

I had been diagnosed with Premature Ovarian Failure aged 21 so always knew that any children I had would not come the conventional way. Although we tried IVF first, that is not to say that adoption was second best.

We started our process with an adoption evening at our local Social Services office which included couples wanting to foster, couples who had their own children and couples who had already adopted and were going for their second, which we felt was encouraging!

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This made up our minds to go for it, so we applied and before long we had the first of many visits from Amanda, our social worker. I have to say we were grateful that she was a mature social worker with her own life experiences. I think if she had been a lot younger, we might have found the process harder. Martin and I were asked to write a background about ourselves and, whilst mine was like War & Peace, Martin's was much more factual. The thing about it is, it doesn't matter, everyone is different. The social workers aren't looking for the perfect couple, and if it appeared you were they would probably be very worried.

The visits continued on a monthly basis and towards the end it was more intensive, with perhaps fortnightly visits. I couldn't tell exactly how many visits we had, perhaps a dozen, and we were interviewed separately too.

About halfway through we went on our Adoption Triangle course which I found fascinating. You discover all sorts of things about yourself, and for me the highlight was meeting a young mum who had given her baby up for adoption and listening to her thoughts.

Finally, after about 18 months (this time-scale was longer than some assessments due to personal matters), the day of the Adoption Panel arrived and we were so nervous. At that time you didn't attend, so we just had to wait at home but, when the phone call came that we had been successful, the champagne flowed. We were approved in November 1995 and by July 1996 we had that all-important phone call to say that we were being considered for a baby girl.

Because there were some health issues, we had more information than is usual with a baby under one year old and we were lucky enough to see a photograph of her. She was beautiful but another couple was also in the running and, due to legalities, the final hearing was not until September. For reasons of her own, our social worker told us that the decision was being made on a Friday, but in actual fact it was on a Thursday. So when the phone rang at about 5pm on Thursday, hers was the last voice I was expecting. I'll never forget what she said: "She's all yours." That was all I heard before the tears started.

After all the heartache and struggle, we had our own baby girl aged nine months. The next day we went to meet her for the first time. We were taken to the foster home and ushered into the lounge where there was a lot of polite conversation between us and the social workers whilst the foster mum woke our baby up. Then she was there and the tears began again. The next few weeks went by in a haze of visits, meetings and shopping for cots, prams and baby things.

During the process we met the birth mother. As you can imagine, it was a strange feeling and there were lots of mixed emotions on both sides but I'm glad we did it. A lot of questions were asked on both sides, which means I have answers for the future.

Life very quickly settled into a routine of bottles, nappies and feeding but we loved every minute of it. The adoption order was dealt with by solicitors and went through comparatively smoothly and those words "she's all yours" were once again uttered. Just over a year later, we were lucky enough to adopt Molly's full sister, Amelia, aged 13 months so our family is complete.

Adoption, for us, was the answer. That's not to say it was all smooth going. There were lots of times when we felt frustrated, resentful and fed up but we kept each other going. We also had a good laugh at times recalling past events in our younger days. Everyone copes differently under pressure and what is right for one person is not for the next. I treated the whole experience as a journey and took each step as it came and got through that and on to the next one. I didn't let myself think about how long it would take or what the end result would be, it was bit by bit, rung by rung, until I got to the top and I can tell you the view is definitely worth it!

My husband? Now he's another ball game. Every time Amanda came round it was, "Well, are there any babies out there or what?" Which I have to say got him into trouble on more than one occasion. But we got there in the end and all that matters now is that our girls are healthy and happy. If you do decide to adopt, be prepared for some surprises good and bad, be honest and true to yourself, hang in there because the rewards are worth it. Good Luck!

Elaine

Useful addresses:

<p>BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering) incorporating NORCAP</p> <p>Advice, publications and a newsletter</p>	<p>Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS Tel: 020 7421 2600 Fax: 020 7421 2601 E mail: mail@baaf.org.uk www.baaf.org.uk</p>
<p>IAC (Intercountry Adoption Centre)</p>	<p>22 Union Street, Barnet, Hertfordshire EN5 4HZ Tel : 0208 449 2562 Fax: 0208 440 5675 Advice Line Tel: 0208 447 4753 (Mon-Fri 10.30am – 12.30pm) www.iacentre.org.uk</p>
<p>The Fostering Network (Formerly National Foster Care Association)</p>	<p>87, Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA + Regional Offices Tel: 0207 620 6400 Fax: 0207 620 6401 Helpline Tel: 0207 401 9582 E mail: info@fostering.net www.fostering.net</p>
<p>OASIS (Overseas Adoption Support and Information Services)</p>	<p>Only contact is via the website www.adoptionoverseas.org</p>
<p>Adoption UK (Formerly PPIAS)</p>	<p>Linden House, 55 The Green, South Bar Street, Banbury, Oxfordshire, OX16 9AB Tel: 01295 752240 Fax: 01295 752241 Helpline: 0844 848 7900 (Mon - Fri 10am – 4pm) E mail: enquiries@adoptionuk.org.uk www.adoptionuk.org</p>

Please note that this fact sheet was written by someone who has successfully adopted children and not by a qualified social worker. All factual information is for guidance only and procedures may vary across the country.