

Thinking about adoption or fostering?



www.baaf.org.uk

Adoption

Who are the children who need adoption?

For children who cannot live with their own parents or relatives, adoption offers a chance of a new permanent family.

It is estimated that there may be as many as 4,000 children in the UK waiting for permanent new families. Many of these children are of school age and over half of them are in groups of brothers and sisters who need to be placed together.

There are disabled children of all ages, including babies, and children whose future development is unclear. Some children will have been abused and all will have experienced moves and uncertainty, and their resulting behaviour may be challenging.

These children are from a great variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds. They include some pre-school children, particularly from minority ethnic groups.

Although children placed for adoption cannot live with their birth families, it is now widely acknowledged that an "open" rather than a secretive attitude to adoption is most helpful to the child. It is common for there to be an exchange of written information, perhaps once or twice a year, via the adoption agency. There will be unique arrangements for each individual child which may mean direct contact for some children with various members of their birth families, including grandparents and brothers and sisters who may be placed elsewhere.

Who can adopt these children?

The children described above have varied needs and agencies need a variety of parents. There is no such thing as the "ideal" adoptive family. Agencies nowadays are more interested in what you have to offer a child who needs adoption than in your income level and whether you have children or not. You do not have to follow any religion to be considered and people from all ethnic origins are needed. Disabled people are not excluded and sometimes experience of disability will be positively welcomed. Everyone has to have a medical examination and health issues will need to be explored.

A record of offences will need to be carefully looked into but, apart from some offences against children, will not necessarily rule you out. The only legal requirement is that you are over 21 years of age. Married couples and single people can adopt. In England and Wales, unmarried couples – heterosexual, lesbian or gay – can adopt jointly. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, one partner in an unmarried couple can adopt.

Agencies have a responsibility to ensure as far as possible that prospective adopters are likely to be fit and active at least until their child is a young adult. Although there is no upper age limit, many agencies would not usually expect there to be more than about a 45-year age gap between the child and their adoptive parents. However, this is not inflexible and depends partly on what the adopters are offering in relation to the needs of waiting children.

There are far more people wanting to adopt white babies without disabilities than there are such babies needing new homes. To avoid recruiting and preparing families whom they will never be able to use, some agencies close their waiting list for prospective adopters for these babies. Others may take on very few new families. Most birth parents placing infants want their child to go to relatively young adopters rather than to people the age of the birth parents' own parents, and to couples rather than to single people.

Agencies will be looking for families who can meet the needs of individual children. Some children will benefit from being adopted by a couple who already have children of their own whilst other children may need the one-to-one attention of a single person.

Agencies will always try to recruit families who match the racial and cultural background of the child and share the child's religion and language. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. A family may then be sought who can value and actively develop the child's sense of ethnic and cultural identity, even though they don't share it.

Adoption focuses on the needs of the child, and the agency will concentrate on looking with you at what you have to offer waiting children and what sort of child would best fit into your family.

About BAAF

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) is the leading UK-wide membership organisation for all those concerned with adoption, fostering and child care issues.

We offer many services, including advice and information to the public and to social workers and other professionals; publications; and seminars, workshops and training. We campaign to promote the best interests of children in care. We also help to link children with permanent new families via *Be My Parent* and the Adoption Register. We do not consider applications to adopt or foster, but our child placement consultants, based in BAAF's offices, can put you in touch with an agency in your area.

Adoption Standards

There are National Minimum Standards for the adoption work in England and Wales. National Care Standards for adoption work in Scotland have also been issued. You can access these via BAAF's website, www.baaf.org.uk.

What next?

● Applying to an adoption agency

Unless you are a close relative of the child you want to adopt, you will need to go through an adoption agency. Some agencies – like Barnardo's – are voluntary societies; others are part of the local authority social services or social work department. If you are thinking about adopting a child and would like to take things further, you should contact agencies covering your area. There is a list of all the adoption agencies in BAAF's book, *Adopting a Child*, and on BAAF's website. You are not limited to your own immediate locality but most agencies work roughly within a 50-mile radius of their office. Although you can only follow through an application with one agency, you can contact several at this early stage. BAAF also publishes the *Be My Parent* newspaper twelve times a year. It contains photographs and profiles of children who need families now. Your local agency will have a copy of *Be My Parent* or you can buy a subscription for three, six months or a year (3, 6 or 12 issues). You can respond to children in *Be My Parent* before you have approached an agency or been approved as an adoptive parent.

● Assessment and preparation

It takes time – usually six months at least – for the social workers from the agency to get to know you and help prepare you for the task ahead. Most agencies run preparation groups as well as seeing you on your own. Confidential enquiries will be made of your local social services or social work department and the police. You will be examined by your doctor and be asked to provide personal references from at least two friends, who will be interviewed. The agency's Adoption Panel will consider a report on your application and recommend that you should be approved as an adopter or not.

● After approval

Once you are approved, your agency will try and match you with a child. You can also respond to children in *Be My Parent* and other family-finding publications. With your agreement, your agency will also refer you to the Adoption Register for England and Wales, which links waiting children with waiting approved adopters, or you can apply to the Register to refer yourselves.

Adoption agencies do offer financial help in certain circumstances. Your local agency will advise you on this.

● Adoption support services

Many families welcome the support and help which are available to them and their children after adoption. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (England and Wales) ensures that all local authorities have a duty to provide an assessment for adoption support services, for adopters and adopted people, irrespective of the date of adoption. This support can come from the adoption agency which has placed your child with you or from a specialist post-adoption centre (*Adopting a Child* and *The Adopter's Handbook*, both published by BAAF, contain a comprehensive list of post-adoption centres). In Scotland, section 1 of the Adoption (Scotland) Act 1978 lays a duty on adoption agencies to provide support.

Adopting a child from abroad

Often people hear about the distress of children in other countries and want to offer to adopt one of them. But children's best interests are not necessarily served by being adopted away from their own families, including extended family, country and culture.

Aid agencies tell us that children who become separated from their parents during crises, such as natural disasters and civil wars, can very often be reunited with members of their families once things have calmed down a little. For those children who are not able to grow up in their own families, many countries are now developing their own adoption and fostering services. However, this can take time and, in the short term, adoption by a family from another country may meet the needs of some children.

Adopting a child from abroad is not an easy option. It is important to take time to look beyond the immediate wish to help a child in need and think through the implications for the child and for you in the long term. Children whose families and communities have been unable to care for them will need a lot of help and understanding from their adoptive parents to develop a positive sense of their own identity and to understand the reasons why

they have been adopted in another country. Children who have been cared for in a large institution, or those for whom there is very little information about their birth family, may develop emotional and health problems as they grow up.

BAAF's Advice Note, *Intercountry Adoption*, tells you more about the procedures, legal requirements, and where to obtain further information.

If you do decide to go ahead, you will need to contact your local social services or social work department, or a voluntary adoption agency approved to do this work, to ask them to provide a report on your suitability as adopters for a child from overseas (a home study). There will probably be a charge for this. For a list of these agencies, please see www.baaf.org.uk or contact BAAF staff or the Overseas Adoption Helpline. The assessment and preparation process will be very similar to that described above. You will also need to contact the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate, Lunar House, 40 Wellesley Road, Croydon CR9 2BY; Tel: 0870 606 7766 for information about the procedures; ask for *Guidance for Prospective Adopters*.

Foster care

Who are the children who need foster care?

Most of the children looked after by local authorities when their own families are unable to care for them are placed in foster families. There are currently over 80,000 children looked after by local authorities in the UK, 62 per cent of whom are in foster homes. Families are unable to care for their children for a variety of reasons. Sometimes parents have poor physical or mental health and have to be hospitalised, or they may misuse drugs or alcohol and need help to overcome their addiction. Children may have been neglected and they may also have been abused.

The children range in age from babies to teenagers and include children in large family groups and disabled children. They come from a great variety of ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds and they all need families who can reflect their own backgrounds as closely as possible.

Fostering is shared caring. Foster carers are not the child's legal parents: they usually share the caring with the birth parents, who will probably be encouraged to visit regularly, and with the agency or authority responsible for the child's welfare.

The vast majority of fostered children are able to return to their birth families; the majority of them return home within a year. Many children need help for only a few days or weeks, but others may stay for several months or even longer while attempts are made to resolve the family's problems. For a small number of children, adoption becomes the plan and foster carers have an important role in helping the child to move on to their new permanent family.

Sometimes, particularly for children aged 10 or over, foster care may be the plan until the child grows up. This long-term or 'permanent' fostering cannot provide the same legal security as adoption for either the child or the foster family but it may be the right plan for some children.

There are a number of specialist fostering schemes which your local authority or a neighbouring one may run. For example, some children need very temporary care but on a regular basis, perhaps one or two weekends a month. This is often called respite care. Other children and young people need family care following a court appearance and this is often called remand fostering.

Who can foster?

Foster carers are urgently needed in all parts of the UK and a great variety of people can apply. Many foster families have their own birth children. Others are childless. Some are married and others are single, divorced or widowed. Some are older people whose own children have grown up and may be living independently. Families from all ethnic and religious backgrounds are needed. There are UK National Standards on Foster Care and a Code of Practice (available from Fostering Network, see www.fostering.net). There are also National Minimum Standards against which fostering agencies are inspected. These are available from the Department for Education and Skills (see www.dfes.gov.uk).

What next?

● Applying to an agency

Fostering is essentially a local service helping children to return home to their birth families. If you are interested in fostering, you should contact your local authority social services or social work department or a neighbouring one to find out what is needed in your area. You can also apply to an independent fostering provider or to a voluntary agency which offers a fostering service. There is a list of all fostering agencies in BAAF's book, *Fostering a Child*, and on its website. BAAF's leaflets, *Foster Care: Some questions answered* and *Meeting Children's Needs Through Adoption and Fostering* may be of interest.

● Assessment and preparation

Many agencies run preparation and training groups for prospective foster carers, as well as meeting with you individually. The whole family will need to be involved. If you have birth children, they will need a chance to think about what fostering will mean for them. Confidential enquiries will be made of your local authority and the police, and a medical report will be needed from your GP. The fostering panel for the local authority to which you have applied or that of the independent fostering provider or voluntary agency will consider a report on your application and decide whether you should be approved as a foster carer or not. This process usually takes several months.

● After approval

Foster carers receive an allowance, and in some cases an additional fee, to cover the cost of caring for their foster children. From April 2007, there will be a recommended national minimum fostering allowance. BAAF or any fostering agency will be able to give you the details. Agencies link foster carers with a social worker who offers ongoing support, supervision and help. You will also have ongoing contact with the social workers for the children placed with you. Additional training sessions should be available and there will also often be the opportunity to attend a local support group of foster carers.

BAAF offices and other organisations

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Be My Parent

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There are several other organisations which will help you if you decide to embark on the journey to adoption or fostering:

Adoption UK

Website: www.adoptionuk.org.uk

Fostering Network

Website: www.fostering.net

Intercountry Adoption Centre

Website: www.icacentre.org.uk

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