

What is adoption?

Adoption is a way of providing a new family for children who cannot be brought up by their own parents.

It's a legal procedure in which all the parental responsibility is transferred to the adopters.

Once an adoption order has been granted it can't be reversed except in extremely rare circumstances.

An adopted child loses all legal ties with their first mother and father (the "birth parents") and becomes a full member of the new family, usually taking the family's name.

What is the difference between adoption and fostering?

Foster carers share the responsibility for the child with a local authority and the child's parents.

Fostering is usually a temporary arrangement, though sometimes foster care may be the plan until the child grows up. This longterm 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.

See our [fostering page](#) for more information.

Who are the children who need adopting?

There are around 4,000 children across the UK needing adoption every year. These children are from a great variety of [ethnic](#) and religious backgrounds.

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 and children whose future development is unclear - see our advice note [Meeting Children's Needs](#) for more details (our [Opening Doors project](#) may also be of interest). Or read articles from *Be My Parent* about caring for children with [special needs](#).

Some children will have been abused and/or neglected and all will have experienced moves and uncertainty and their resulting behaviour may be challenging.

Who can adopt?

- You have to be over 21, happy to make space in your life and home for a child, patient, flexible and energetic, and determined to make a real difference to a child's life, for a lifetime.
- Some people think about adoption but never look into it further – possibly because they are over 40 and think they'll be ruled out. But they are wrong, there is no upper age limit. Agencies are looking for adopters who have the physical and mental energy to care for demanding children, and whose lifestyle suggests they will still have that energy when the child is a teenager, or young adult. Older children are among those children who wait the longest so adoption agencies are keen to hear from people who can give a permanent and loving home to an older child.
- A record of offences will need to be carefully looked into but, apart from some offences against children, will not necessarily rule someone out.
- Everyone has to have a medical examination and health issues will need to be explored.
- People from all ethnic origins and religions can adopt although some religions and cultures have their own perspectives on this. It is essential that any family with whom a child is placed is in a strong position to meet the child's emotional, identity, health and development needs. Over many years, research and practice experience indicates that children usually do best when brought up in a family that reflects or promotes their ethnic, cultural or religious identity. What this means in practice is that efforts are made to find a family that reflects or can promote the child's individual identity. This search always needs to be balanced against the importance of minimizing any delay in placing the child. In practice, social workers need carefully to consider how available adopters can meet as many of a child's assessed needs as possible while ensuring the child is placed with the minimum of delay. In England, the revised Adoption Statutory Guidance 2011, establishes a clear framework for addressing these complex issues.
- Disabled people are not excluded and sometimes experience of disability will be positively welcomed.
- A single person, or one partner in an unmarried couple - heterosexual, lesbian or gay - can adopt. Since 30 December 2005 unmarried couples in England and Wales can apply to adopt jointly. Unmarried couples in Scotland and Northern Ireland can also apply to adopt jointly.

For more information, see our advice note: [Adoption - Some questions answered](#).

How do people apply to adopt?

You will need to go through an adoption agency. Some agencies are voluntary organisations (see the website of [Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies](#)

Most are part of the local authority children's services or social services (in England and Wales) or social work department (in Scotland) or Health and Social Care Trust (in Northern Ireland). You can find an agency near you in our [agency directory](#) or find your local authority or voluntary adoption agency's contact details in your phone book.

People are not limited to their own immediate locality but most agencies work roughly within a 50 mile radius of their office. Although it is only possible to follow through an application with one agency, several can be contacted at this early stage. Many agencies will offer you an informal meeting with a social worker before you make a formal application.

The process differs slightly in Northern Ireland where applications to a Trust other than the one in which the applicant resides can be made.

How do people get approved to adopt?

As of July 2013 there is now a two stage adoption process in England which takes about 6 months to complete. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland the same processes take place but are not as prescriptive or rigidly divided as in England. The process in its entirety should take no longer than eight months in Wales and Northern Ireland and seven in Scotland.

Initially agencies will encourage you to find out all the information you need about adoption and to fully explore what it will mean for you and your family. They will provide you with written information and offer information sessions. When you are ready to proceed the agency will provide you with a [Registration of Interest Form](#) and this will enable them to decide whether they can begin to work with you.

1. **Stage One – Registration & Checks**

This stage of the assessment allows you to explore in more detail what will be involved in adoption through attending training provided by your agency, doing relevant reading and beginning some exploratory work which you will be asked to complete with support from the agency. At the same time your agency will complete all the statutory checks so they can be confident about progressing you through to a full assessment.

Your agency will complete a [Stage One Plan](#) with you. This will set out the responsibilities and expectations for this stage of the process for both you and the agency..

You will also be asked to provide various pieces of factual information along with nominating 3 personal references who know you well who will be asked to provide written references followed by an interview, two of them will need to be non-family members. You will also be asked to attend a medical and have a police check through the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS).

You will be invited to attend preparation groups with other prospective adopters where you will learn more about the children needing adoption and their needs and will also usually have the opportunity to meet experienced adopters. You may be asked to complete some tasks for example increase your contact and involvement with children during this period if the agency feels you would benefit from this.

This stage will usually take two months but you can ask for extra time if you need it and the agency may need extra time to follow up some of the statutory checks for example if they need to contact specialists relating to a medical issue or obtain an overseas police check.

At the end of Stage One the agency will let you know once all the references have been received and they are happy for you to begin the next Stage where a detailed assessment will be completed.

If the agency feels they cannot progress you to the assessment stage they will need to give you written reasons.

If they do not have capacity to offer you a full assessment and you do not want to wait then they must signpost you to other agencies or to First4Adoption, the National Adoption Gateway so you can be helped to identify another agency.

2. **Stage Two – Assessment & Approval**

Once you notify the agency that you wish to proceed to the full assessment, the agency will meet with you to agree a [Stage Two plan](#) detailing how the assessment process will be completed. This will include details of assessment meetings, dates for training sessions and a proposed date for the adoption panel.

A social worker from the adoption agency will then make several visits to you in your home or sometimes in their offices. They will speak to you about your past experiences and how

these have influenced you in thinking about what kind of parents you want to be. They may also ask to speak to any children you have living at home or away from home and some of your significant friends and family.

At the end of this assessment the social worker will prepare a written report which you can see and comment on and then this will be presented to the agency's independent adoption panel who will consider the report and recommend whether or not you should be approved as adopters. You will be given the opportunity to meet with the panel to assist them with their recommendation.

The agency's decision maker will usually make their decision that you are approved to adopt within four months of the start of Stage 2 but you can ask for extra time during the assessment if you need it and the agency will let you know if they feel more time is needed.

You can read more about the adoption process in England at www.first4adoption.org.uk/the-adoption-process/

What is 'Fostering for Adoption'?

This is where the local authority places a child for whom they believe that adoption is the right plan with foster carers who are also approved adopters before the final decision has been made that the child can be placed for adoption. If the court agrees that the child should be adopted and the adoption agency approves the 'match' between the carers and the child, the placement then becomes an adoption placement.

The aim is to provide continuity of care for the child and reduce the number of moves they experience before achieving a permanent home. There are many things for prospective adopters who wish to consider this route to adoption and these are further explored in this [carer's leaflet](#) commissioned by UK children's charity Coram and written by BAAF.

The terminology 'Fostering for Adoption' applies to England only but in Scotland placements may also start on a fostering basis.

In NI most prospective adopters chose to become "dual approved" which means they are approved as both foster carers and as adopters so that a child can be placed with them as early as possible in the legal process, on a fostering basis and then adopted when this is agreed in court.

In Wales, as the current proposal stands, prospective adopters, who are also approved foster carers, will have to be matched with the child before the child can be placed with them as foster carers.

What if you don't get approved to adopt?

In England and Wales, if an agency is planning not to approve the prospective adopters, the applicants can make representations to the agency asking them to review their determination. In England, as an alternative, applicants can request that an independent body ([Independent Review Mechanism](#)) undertake this review and make a recommendation to the agency. In Wales there is the [IRM Wales](#).

In Scotland prospective adopters can also ask for a review - and a number of the agencies have established robust procedures for doing this. For advice on this please contact [BAAF's Scotland office](#).

In Northern Ireland a review process exists, similar to that outlined for Scotland.

How are approved adopters matched with a child?

After prospective adopters are approved, their agency will try and match them with a child. They can also enquire about children being profiled in [Be My Parent](#) and other family-finding publications, like *Adoption Today* and *The Scottish Resource Network* newspaper or in local media.

In England and Wales, agencies also refer prospective adopters to the [Adoption Register for England and Wales](#) which links waiting children with waiting approved adopters.

The proposed match will be presented to [an adoption panel](#) who will recommend whether to proceed with the placement.

In Northern Ireland adoptive parents waiting for a placement are referred to the [Adoption Regional Information System \(ARIS\)](#) if they have not been matched with a child from their own agency within 6 months of their approval.

Read about experiences of [finding a child](#) in past issues of *Be My Parent News & Features*.

What happens when the child moves in?

The child will move to live with their new parent/s after a planned period of introductions, which lasts a few weeks or a month or two, depending on the child's needs.

Social workers will remain involved to support the new family and the child at least until an adoption order is made.

Be *My Parent News & Features* has articles on settling in and on [therapy, counselling and support](#).

How is adoption made legal?

There are certain minimum periods for which the child must live with the adopters before an adoption order can be made, or, in England and Wales, before an application can be made to the court. The precise details vary very slightly depending on the country concerned and the circumstances in which the child came to live with the adopters.

A birth mother cannot give consent to adoption until her child is at least six weeks old. Where birth parents do not agree, there is a process for the agreement to be independently witnessed. The detailed process varies according to the legislation of the particular country in the UK.

If birth parents do not agree to adoption, there are circumstances in which the court can override their wishes. Again the detailed process will depend on which country is involved. In many cases the question of consent will be considered by the court before the child is placed for adoption. A children's guardian (England and Wales) or a curator ad litem (Scotland) or a Guardian ad litem (Northern Ireland) will be appointed by the court to investigate and give advice to the court on the child's best interests. In some circumstances, it will be necessary for the question of consent to be considered when the adopters actually apply for the final adoption order.

For more information see our advice note [Adoption - some questions answered](#).

Should children be told that they are adopted?

Yes. Children should be raised knowing they were adopted. Adoptive parents should give appropriate information to the child from the time the child is little and as they grow up.

BAAF's book, [Talking about Adoption to your Adopted Child](#), and our advice note [Talking about origins](#) provides much more information.

Do birth parents and other relatives have any contact with their child after adoption?

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 family, including grandparents and brothers and sisters who may be placed elsewhere. Sometimes there will also be contact with birth parents - if this is best for the child.

For more information and real life stories, see a list of articles about [contact](#) with birth relatives from *Be My Parent News and Features*.

Do adopted children want to trace their birth parents?

Most adopted children are curious about their origins, but this doesn't mean that they don't love their adoptive parents.

Since 1975 adopted people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland have had the right to see their original birth certificate when they reach the age of 18 (in Scotland the age is 16 and this right has existed since legal adoption was first introduced).

Some people are satisfied with the fuller knowledge and understanding gained in this way, while others want to try to trace their birth parents or other family members.

For more information, advice about searching and your feelings about this see our advice note [Talking about origins](#) or visit the Adoption Search Reunion website www.adoptionsearchreunion.org.uk.

What about adopting 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 countries, their culture and their extended family.

BAAF's Advice Note on [Intercountry Adoption](#), covers the procedures, legal requirements and where to obtain further information.

The [Intercountry Adoption Centre](#) can also offer help and advice.

What about adoption by step-parents?

Sometimes step-parents want to adopt the children from the previous relationship of their new partner. If this happens, the child's legal links with their absent birth parent and wider family will be broken. Alternative ways of settling the child's situation may be better for some children - see [BAAF's Advice Notes](#), on Step children and Adoption in England and Wales and Step children and Adoption in Scotland.

My child has been or is going to be adopted. Where can I get help?

The Family Rights Group provides advice and support for families whose children are involved with social services. Visit www.frg.org.uk

The Natural Parents Network is a national contact and support organisation for birth parents living with the memories and feelings surrounding the adoption of their child. www.n-p-n.co.uk

You also might like to order [If your child is being adopted](#) and [Pregnant and thinking about adoption?](#) from BAAF's Advice Notes series. Both of these are largely targeted at families who consent to the adoption. If you don't consent to the adoption, you should get legal advice as soon as possible.

In Northern Ireland an adoption counselling and support service, [Next Step](#), is available, free of charge, to birth relatives of a child who has been or is likely to be placed for adoption.

I am an adoptive parent. Can you advise me where to get support?

Adoption UK was founded by adoptive parents to offer support, information, advice and encouragement to prospective and established adopters. Visit www.adoptionuk.org for more information.

You can read about [therapy, counselling and support](#) in past issues of *Be My Parent News & Features*.

CASA is another option. It is a group of independent Adoption Support Agencies (ASAs) who are registered under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. They provide support services to all parties affected by adoption or long-term fostering throughout the UK. [Click here to go to CASA website](#)