

We need to talk about adoption



Scotland's
Adoption Register
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adoptionuk
for every adoptive family
in Scotland



An introduction to Adoption Week Scotland 2017

Adoption Week Scotland aims to raise the profile of adoption and highlight the position of children who continue to need the love, stability and security that an adoptive home can offer. But adoption has changed over the years, and Adoption Week also provides an opportunity to talk about some of the ways it is different - to hear the voices of all those involved and to consider why it remains an important option for some children despite the complexities and challenges.

The number of children placed for adoption has fallen significantly over recent decades - down to about a quarter of the level that was common during the

1970s when numbers were at their peak. The change has

partly been driven by a welcome reduction in the stigma and prejudice experienced by single and unmarried mothers. Traditional perceptions of adoption which saw this as providing a clean and complete break with the child's birth family are also increasingly at odds with the way that adoptions are now arranged.

We also have a much better understanding of the impact on children of the disruptive and traumatic experiences that can be factors in the decision to seek adoption. The love, security and sense of belonging that adoption can bring are critical, but in many cases we

now also know that the adoptive families and the children need continuing support to understand and manage the additional complications. We know that

adoption is a lifelong process and that the position of all those involved - adopted person, adoptive parent, birth parent and wider family members need to be understood if we are going to make the best possible plans for children.

The testimonies in this booklet from people involved in adoption - birth parents, adoptive parents and people who have been adopted - reflect both the challenges and the positives of adoption. We hope Adoption Week Scotland 2017 will be an opportunity for a wide range of stories to be heard; that by talking about the reality of adoption people can get a better understanding of some of the joys and challenges, but also hear the evidence about why it remains such an important and positive option for many children.



An adopted adult who has gone on to adopt

Adoption is a subject not only close to my heart but intertwined into every aspect of my life.

I was born to a 16 year-old mother who felt unable to bring me up so I went into foster care at birth and adopted at 5 months-old. When I was 3 my parents adopted 9 month-old twin boys. My mum said that myself and the boys only came to her with one sheet of paper of information regarding us. No medical histories, no information regarding the circumstances or impact of early trauma or neglect both of which it was found later that my brothers had been subject to.

I grew up knowing from the beginning I was adopted and I didn't experience any negative side to sharing that with others, this is an area I think my mum got spot on, she gave age appropriate information in a loving way throughout my life. She was always honest and calm even when faced with what must have been difficult questions for her to try and answer.

By the time my brothers were 2 they were already showing worrying signs of developmental delay and severe behavioural problems. As they got older these issues became more and more serious. 30 years ago none of the many now diagnosed conditions such as FAS and attachments disorders were known of or discussed. This is something that should not happen to the next generation of adopted children, support is fundamental to all children and adoptive parents and it needs to be acknowledged that trauma in some form is suffered by every adopted child no matter how young at placement.

Growing up I had a very close relationship with my mum but I always needed to know "Who did I look like?" "Where did I get my unusually small hands from?" "Why didn't my family want me?" At 18 I traced through social work my birth mother, I was well prepared and counselled by a great social worker and after birth mother agreeing we met up and we were then left to develop the relationship ourselves.

Overall it was something I needed to do and I don't regret it at all. Many adopted children will need to trace birth family not because they are unhappy or ungrateful to their adopted families but because often deep down there is a need to know, to question and hopefully to find understanding, adoptive parents are so very important in supporting that part of their child's life despite it being a highly emotive time.



The process to adopt was slow and invasive and often upsetting as the delays prolonged everything with the feeling that we could lose him never far away until we were given parental rights...

Would I go back and do it again? Absolutely! It was always the right decision and he was worth fighting for. It was so so hard in many ways but to be given a little life that is now entrusted to me is a privilege that has no comparison.

My son is now 5 and just started school and is doing well, he is extremely challenging and demanding and exhausting and had we not already been a experienced parents, I know we would have struggled a lot more than we have. Post adoption support is essential, and I wish there was more help easily accessible for my son. He knows he is adopted but his 2 big

brothers aren't and that will be hard for him in years to come and there are many hurdles still to face for him and us all as a family. It is truly my hope that he is given the best opportunity to be whatever he wants regardless of his origins and the difficulties that has brought him.

He is not lucky to have us and we are not amazing for adopting him, he deserved more from the moment he was conceived and I just hope we can go some way to helping to make up for that and I hope that in the future the care and adoption system does the same.

At the age of 38 as an adult adoptee and as a mother to birth and adopted children what would I say to sum up adoption? I think it is an amazing and fulfilling journey, you find yourself laughing and crying in equal measures! Being an adopted adult has made me hold on to my own family that little bit tighter and for my adopted son it makes me fight that bit harder. It is by no means an easy journey, it won't all be rainbows and unicorns but then in life what is? And you are in a unique position to change a little persons' life and enhance your own.



Stories involving birth family members

Adoption is a complex process that involves different stories and perspective. It is important to consider all involved when thinking about the impact on individuals. Adoption leads to children becoming legally separated from birth parents, but the legacy of their birth family remains a part of who they are and where they came from, and it is crucial that adoptive families support their children to explore, and even trace or communicate with birth family members in some cases.

Birthlink is a support service that manages the Adoption Contact Register, and can support individuals in contacting birth family members. They hold stories from birth parents seeking adult adoptees, as well as adopted adults seeking other family members.

Birth family tracing is a challenging and emotional activity. It does not always end as those involved may predict, or choose, and may not lead to further relationship.

“Nicola, was seeking to make contact with her birth son Daniel, adopted as a young child and approached Birthlink to support this. Following engagement with the local authority who placed him, Daniel let them know he did not wish to make contact with his birth mother at this time. Nicola expressed that while she was naturally very disappointed by his response, she felt overwhelmingly relieved and comforted to know that Daniel was alive and well. She shared that over the years she had worried that he may have died and that she would never know.”

Support and mediation through the early stages of contact can make the process easier for everyone – in the case of Kelly, who was searching for her birth cousin, Mandy, who had been placed for adoption as a baby. Kelly felt it important that Mandy knew about the genetic predisposition within their family of mental health conditions, as well as seeking to build a relationship. The supported mediation ensured they had plenty of time to get to know one another over a period of months, sharing regular letters and photographs, building strong foundations to their relationship, before meeting in person. They now have a close friendship.

Often birth family reunions do not need to take place in a face to face capacity, but it is undeniable that both the adopted person and members of their birth family are likely to have some curiosity about the other’s wellbeing. Birthlink have some individuals who never make direct contact with the person they seek, but receive some comfort from hearing that they are fine – one birth parent explained “I’m glad I phoned now, I feel better for having talked to you and to know how happy he is.”

There are circumstances where birth parents seek contact with the children that they relinquished for adoption with positive results.

“Eleanor’s birth daughter was adopted at a young age and she was keen to make contact to let her know that she had never forgotten her, and that she was there to answer any questions Cassie might have. Cassie, with two children of her own and



a close relationship with both her adoptive mother and brother was happy to have contact made via Birthlink, and asked for a letter and photographs from her mother. Immediately struck by the likeness between them in the photographs sent, Cassie and Eleanor began a letter exchange. After 9 months, despite Cassie's worries about hurting her adoptive family, the two felt ready to arrange to meet. They remain in close contact and both feel they can understand each other, and hope to develop their friendship. Both Eleanor and Cassie express their feelings of having benefitted from this contact."

Today, families may be given the option of an 'open' adoption, where contact still takes place with members of the birth family. More common is what is known as 'letterbox contact' which involves letters being sent from either family, usually via an intermediary agency. This means that children who are too young to read/write themselves can have the support of their adoptive parents to send letters to members of their birth family. Depending on the circumstances of the adoption, it can be challenging to manage and maintain contact. However, advice and support is available to families to do this.

We would always advise seeking support for anyone affected by adoption who is looking for a birth relative. Safeguarding of children and young people throughout the process is crucial, as is the understanding of the emotional impact for all involved.

Stories from the foster carer

As a foster carer, I have worked with the most important people involved in the adoption system - the children, birth parents and prospective adoptive parents. In my time as a carer I have moved on many different children to their permanent homes - some back to birth families, some kinship care placements, and the majority to adoptive families.

What I have learnt is that consideration of all needs is paramount - trying to make links with the birth parents is very important to ensure that you have as much information as possible for the child's sake. Building up a trusting relationship with the birth parents to help them and the child through the process can be difficult, but can be very beneficial.

It's a brave decision for birth parents to meet with their children's adoptive parents, for them to meet the people who will be parenting their children can be so difficult. But the positive impact this can have on the children involved, and the child's history and story being carried forward, can make a massive difference to how they feel about where they came from.

I've learnt that the most important thing for birth parents to know is that their children will be safe and loved, and in many cases, will have a life with better chances. I've worked with birth parents who have been clear in their decision that their children will move onto adoption from an early point, and for exactly those reasons. This made such a difference to their children's transition to their family home.

What do we know from research?

At the start of this booklet, we described how adoption remains an important and positive option for many children, despite the complexities and challenges. This perspective emerges from a rich history of research carried out in the UK and elsewhere. In the 1970s, Jane Rowe and Lydia Lambert's Children Who Wait study identified that many looked after children were suffering as a result of 'drift' and lack of planning for their long-term futures, while John Triseliotis' In Search of Origins underlined the importance of adopted people having access to information about their early lives. These findings remain relevant, even though adoption policy and practice have seen a number of changes since then.

Adoption in recent years is more likely to involve older children, siblings groups, children with disabilities and/or emotional and behavioural problems. Many children have experienced significant abuse or neglect. This means that adoption has in some ways become more complex, as adoptive parents are likely to face additional tasks in helping their children understand and deal with the impact of their early lives. Research programmes such as the Adoption Support Initiative have helped us better understand the processes involved in permanence planning and family placement. We know that adoption, alongside other forms of permanence, works best for children when it enables them to grow up in families who can offer stability, a sense of 'belonging' and parental care that is sensitive to their individual needs.

Adoption support is an important part of this picture. Children's needs, and the needs of their families, are likely to change over time. Adopters have reported the benefits of a range of types of support: from opportunities to get to know other adoptive families, to support with contact or information exchange with birth families, to therapeutic interventions. Not all challenges can be predicted in advance, but even children with a very poor early prognosis can show remarkable catch-up over time.

In Scotland today, research continues to explore the impact of adoption and other forms of permanence. The Permanently Progressing? study, currently being undertaken by the Universities of Stirling and York, is exploring the progress of a large cohort of children accommodated during the year 2012-2013 in Scotland by the age of five. The study is collecting and analysing a wide range of data, from national statistics to individual interviews with parents, carers and children. Initial results will be reported in 2018-2019. The aim is for the project to follow this cohort over a number of years, so we can understand how the lives of adopted children and their families unfold over time.





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