

Adoption UK: Adoption Barometer 2021 – case studies

For more information and to arrange interviews contact Joe Lumley: 07584 669 577

Please note that most of these interviewees cannot be filmed or photographed in a way that would identify them, for the safety of their children.

England

Real name: Amy

Location: England (she does not want to reveal which county/town)

OK to do interviews but cannot be filmed or photographed in a way that would identify her and only wants her first name to be used.

Subjects: LGBT adoption, adopting during the Covid-19 pandemic, choosing an adoption agency

My partner and I wanted to start a family through adoption, so we spoke to a friend who had adopted. She told us how she was very disappointed by the lack of support she received from the local authority she had adopted through after running into difficulties with her daughter. This was why we decided not to adopt through a local authority.

We found St Francis Children's Society online, noticing there were photographs of diverse adoptive families on their homepage. We attended an information evening which focused on the fact there's not just one way an adoptive family should look, which was reassuring.

As an LGBT couple we thought we might experience discrimination during the adoption process but when I shared these concerns, we were told this wouldn't be the case. We discovered the agency offers long-term support and training resources for adopted children, up to the age of 18, which we knew we wanted.

When the pandemic hit, we had a lot of time to talk things through. We decided to go ahead and put in our first forms of interest in May last year. We've since attended various training courses over Zoom, on topics including introductions, the adoption process and contact with birth parents.

The agency has a life-story work specialist, a Theraplay expert and a buddy system. We're buddies with a couple who have adopted. We message them when we're having a hard time family-finding and they advise us on what should we be looking for. The agency also provided us with access to LinkMaker's family finding service as well as to New Family Social, the LGBT+ adoption and fostering charity.

Pseudonym: Beverly

Location: South East England (she does not want to reveal which county/town)

OK to do interviews but cannot be filmed or photographed in a way that would identify her.

Subjects: Being adopted and an adoptive parent, post adoption support, additional needs

As an adopted person with two adopted children, I can't emphasise enough the importance of specialist support for adoption. A lot of therapists think that if you can't remember trauma, it won't affect you, but I still have a lot of issues around loss and rejection, despite being adopted when I was very young back in the 1960s.

I've had a good life but there are still issues and at no point has anyone ever asked, "Do you need help?" I did seek support from the post adoption support centre after I'd traced my birth mother

and wanted to make contact. I had half a dozen sessions with a counsellor who offered advice and acted as an intermediary, writing to my birth mother and offering her counselling.

When we did meet it was very emotional. It meant everything to me as I could get answers to questions that I'd waited all my life to ask. I found out I had two half-sisters – one of them looks just like me. It was important for me to see people who look like me. I've recommended the post adoption support centre to many other people as the help they provided was excellent.

Unlike me, my teenage daughters were born into drink and drugs, so have a lot to unpack. Both have dyslexia, and my youngest is also autistic, has ADHD and a condition which affects brain formation. Her behavioural needs have resulted in the rest of the family experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder.

We've fought for support throughout their lives. No teacher we have encountered has done thorough training in attachment and the needs of the adopted child. One therapist my children saw didn't acknowledge that I was adopted, didn't follow boundaries, and didn't do any prior research into what the children knew about their birth parents. We did see a good art therapist who was able to address some of the girls' issues, but she wasn't trained in adoption. I had to educate her about attachment and rejection.

None of the support we've received has been outstanding. When you're offered support, you're in a place of crisis so you don't investigate what you're given because you're just so grateful to take whatever is being offered.

Real name: Catherine Doolan

Location: England (she does not want to reveal which county/town)

OK to do interviews but cannot be filmed or photographed in a way that would identify her.

Subjects: Single adoption, trans racial adoption.

Having got to the point in my life where I'd still not found anyone but knew I wanted to be a parent I started the adoption process as a single person in 2019. My son came home during the summer of 2020. It's been a whirlwind, but he has settled well. He has such a lovely nature.

I am white, while my son is mixed race. At approval panel I was asked how I could help him learn about his Afro Caribbean heritage. I don't live in the most diverse of areas, but my sister-in-law has children who are mixed race, so diversity is part of our family. I plan to take him to festivals like Notting Hill Carnival, and visit Antigua when he is older. I'll also look after his hair and skin, making sure I get the right moisturiser cream and sun lotion.

The thing that did come as a shock was the number of times I've been asked personal questions about my son by people we hardly know. They ask what race he is, or whether I adopted him from overseas. I seem to get more questions about his race than anything else.

Northern Ireland

Pseudonym: Isobel

Northern Ireland (Ok for nation to be mentioned but not town)

**Ok to do interviews but would need to be anonymous using pseudonym Isobel, so no face.
Subjects: NEET, bullying, child leaving home prematurely, grooming, self-harm, mental health issues, lack of post adoption support.**

1/2 cases studies from Isobel

Our daughter is 20 and has been not in education, employment, or training (NEET) for four years now.

At 15 she refused to go to school as she was being bullied. Following a home assessment with an education welfare officer it was decided she would not return to school due to her severe mental health issues. She completed her coursework from home, achieving three GCSEs, beyond what we could have expected.

We encouraged her to apply for a college drama course, which she started the following academic year. But after a few weeks she complained about the course, everyone on it and the teacher, so stopped going.

At this point we had no say over what she did with her life. We were side-lined as she completely shut us out. She'd stay in bed all day and stay up all night.

She left our home just before she turned 18 to live in a hostel. Over the last two years she's lived in five different hostels. She's on universal credit and personal independence payment so amassed quite a lot of money, but because of the people she was mixing with, she became involved with drink, drugs and men who use her, including one who has spent around £5,000 of her savings.

We now have little to no contact with her. We're terrified about her future and our hearts are broken.

2/2 two cases studies from Isobel

Our daughter was eight when we adopted her. She was 14 when things started to get really difficult.

One day she said she was going to kill herself and pulled out a kitchen knife, but thankfully my husband grabbed it off her.

There were then multiple overdoses, resulting in her being hospitalised, before she moved on to self-harming, cutting her arms and legs. We never found the implement she was using. She'd also run away for days and there would be search parties before the police brought her back.

Then she began to starve herself, not eating for weeks. She was repeatedly put on a drip in hospital, but we only saw the eating disorder specialist nurse once.

She was discharged from CAMHS without any diagnosis. She then had to wait nine months to be seen by adult mental health services, who offered her a place in a class along with 20 other people. She went once but never went back.

She doesn't receive any mental health care, or see any professional health care workers, so we still don't know what's wrong with her.

Once a child turns 18, as a parent you're shut out. I've witnessed her mental health deteriorate rapidly and yet social services won't discuss anything with me. She's getting no help and won't accept any help. She's not in a position to take onboard what they're telling her.

Scotland

Pseudonym: India

Location: Aberdeenshire

OK to do interviews but cannot be identified in any way.

Subjects: Letterbox contact

We stopped letterbox contact when our daughter told me, "I don't want to know anything about my birth mother, and I don't want her to know anything about me."

Our daughter, who is almost 13, has a lot of anger towards her birth mother. Initially, her birth mother didn't write to us at all for almost two years and she didn't want to meet us. After that, we received ten short letters from her over the years.

Eventually my daughter told me the letters were triggering unhappy memories for her, especially when she found out that her two birth brothers, who had been in a children's home, were going back to live with their mother.

Our social worker encouraged us to keep writing, saying it would be beneficial for our daughter. She suggested I should still write but without telling my daughter. I was not prepared to do this as it's my daughter's decision, not mine.

I think letterbox is a good idea in principle, but it must be about the child and not pushing them into it regardless. Contact with her birth mother was not helping our daughter, and she didn't want it. We eventually concluded that enough was enough.

Real name: Sarah

Location: Fife

Willing to do media interviews dependent upon subject matter. Happy for her first name and her son's first name to be used. Happy for her face to be used but not her son's.

Subject: Home schooling during lockdown, additional needs, FASD, adopted and adoptive parent, education

Our son Jay, who's nine, thrived during the home-schooling lockdowns.

Jay has mild cerebral palsy and FASD, so struggles with writing and maths. School provided three daily tasks but made it clear there was leeway, so we played to Jay's strengths. We covered the basics then supplemented his learning with other things, like a virtual tour of the British Museum, baking and art.

We also have two older birth sons, aged 13 and 16. All three were at home, learning at different stages, so home-schooling wasn't plain sailing, but there was lots of help and guidance from the school. Jay's teacher provided detailed and constructive feedback on the work he submitted, and the virtual class playtime kept him connected with classmates.

His headteacher did a live catch up almost every day, while his class teacher always replied quickly to emails. Jay's school did the best they could under very hard circumstances.

Being adopted myself, I appreciate the understanding around adoption in schools now is vast compared to a generation ago. When I was at school there was no support, and no allowances were made. When I walked out in the middle of my Highers no one knew it was because of stress caused by my brother's adoption placement falling apart and my adoptive parents splitting up.

But Jay's school still doesn't fully understand the complexities of adoption, or FASD. When Jay's in trouble I constantly remind them that he has brain damage. Other children in his class with autism and ADHD get loads of help, and rightly so, but Jay doesn't.

Real name: Julian Thomson

Dundee (Ok for location to be mentioned)

Ok to do interviews and happy to be identified, including on camera.

Subject: Being adopted

Julian was adopted when he was aged seven, along with his younger brother, then aged three. Now aged 28, Julian has recently started a law degree at Abertay University in Dundee.

'Our adoptive parents were loving but were not adequately equipped with the tools and knowledge to successfully navigate the difficulties that adoption can bring. There still needs to be more support for adoptive families today.

From the age of eleven I started to act out of character. I was bullied at school, including physical assaults.

I am currently going through the process of being diagnosed with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Had this been picked up when I was in care it may not have impacted upon my life the way it did. I believe there is a real need for psychological assessment for all adopted children.

When children are adopted their outcomes are improved but expectations need to be managed. Children like my brother and I undergo a huge transition involving class structure, heritage and identity. I grew up on council estate in Dundee for the first five years of my life before being expected to adapt into a middle-class family - a different game with new rules and expectations. It may be down to the fact I have Asperger's Syndrome, but I went through the whole transition with no issue until I was able to process what I'd lost.

There were always subtle tones that I was expected to be grateful. Society expects that once you have been adopted, you should be grateful for the new opportunities you have been given. This does not adequately recognise the profound sense of loss that adoption can have on both children and birth families.

Wales

Real name: Mimi

Location: Ammanford, Carmarthenshire

Willing to do media interviews and be identified.

Subject: Mental ill health, identity, being adopted from overseas, trauma, post adoption support

I suffer from mental ill-health, which is linked to my past trauma.

This happened when I was very young but it affects you later in life. It comes from a feeling of not being wanted and not having a place, or an emotional connection to anyone.

When I was in secondary school I felt like I didn't know who I was. I've been trying to find myself but I'm still looking now, aged 20.

Identity is a big issue for me. I was adopted from Thailand so everyone could tell I was adopted as my adoptive parents are white.

My parents told me from the beginning that was I was adopted but I was not able to hide my adopted status from other people.

I have suffered mental health issues for about five years, on-and-off. At one point it got really bad and I did try to take my own life. At the time I didn't know why I felt this way but I've recently realised it was linked to me feeling lost within myself. I had no motivation and it felt as though there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

My parents are lovely people and I had a really happy childhood and had no other issues in my life, so I couldn't put my finger on the reason for feeling the way I did. I've since learned that past trauma can affect you years later.

I talk to other adopted young people and they all suffer from mental ill health as well. My younger sister, who my parents also adopted from Thailand, suffers from mental health issues. I'm part of a young adopted people group and everyone in the group has suffered from trauma, depression and suicidal thoughts.

I had a meeting with CAMHS in which I explained I was really ill but didn't know why I did what I did. CAMHS just left it at that.

Two years later, when I was 17, I fell out with a lot of girls at school so I dipped and felt low, so left sixth form and went to a college instead.

At college, I dipped again, so one of friends told me to get help. I had a support worker at college who wasn't very good. Then I was with the mental health team, with who I had a few assessments, and then later the crisis team, for about a week. I had no feelings and didn't understand why I was still here and wanted to end my life. I was put on medication but when they were happy I wasn't going to do anything, contact just stopped and I've not heard from them since.

Up until very recently I'd not told my parents about my mental health as I've never been comfortable discussing this with them. When I had to go to hospital after attempting to take my own life, I covered it up and lied to them, just saying I'd been very ill. For me it was not wanting them to feel as if it was their fault and not wanting to put any blame on anyone.

Growing older and having more support from friends gave me that push to tell them. If my closest friends were able to understand, there was no reason for my parent not too. After telling them, they told me they already knew, but never wanted to push me to tell them, as they knew I would when the time was right for me.

During lockdown I've been on antidepressants, which have helped mood-wise, but emotionally, I still don't understand why I feel like this. It's just a reoccurring theme.

My mental health is now better than what it was last year but I do still get those days where I cry a lot, overthink things and have no motivation.

For me, talking about my mental health has been like a weight being lifted off my shoulders.

Real name: Emma Powell

Location: Cardiff

Willing to do media interviews and be identified so long as children are not identified

Subject: Trauma, attachment disorder, post adoption support

My six-year-old son has significant developmental trauma. His attachment disorder makes life at school very difficult for him and challenging for the school to manage. He has horrific meltdowns and goes into fight mode, so he's physically violent towards his teachers and other children.

Thankfully, I was accepted onto Adoption UK's Therapeutic, Education and Support Services in Adoption (TESSA*) programme in Wales. I was provided with a parent partner - an adopter who's trained to support adoptive parents and signpost them towards help and additional support.

We also received a three-hour session with a clinical psychologist, resulting in a full assessment of what my son's needs are and how they're linked to his behaviour. I was also given pointers on how to support my son. I asked my son's school to attend the session and they also found it useful.

The third part of the programme is a course is led by an adoptive parent that goes through various themes of adoption. There were other families on the course, all experiencing differing levels of difficulties with their children. It was important for me to see other parents going through similar experiences to me, as it made me realise that I wasn't alone.

This support helps me to better parent my son. I now understand more about what's going on with him and I have access to courses and information to help me deal with everyday life.

I would not have managed without this, as it has been an awful 18 months. Having practical tips to deal with situations, being part of a community and having support from other parents has given me the strength to keep going.

* TESSA is an early intervention therapeutic parenting programme for adoptive families at risk of the effects of early childhood trauma.

Real name: Michelle

Location: Mid Wales

Willing to do media interviews so long as she is not identified in any way.

Subject: Adopting later in life, being both adopted and an adoptive parent, contact

My niece has learning difficulties and when she gave birth to her daughter, Olivia, it became clear that she was unable to care for her.

I am adopted myself and couldn't bear the thought of Olivia going through the system as my experience wasn't the best, so my husband and I applied to become Olivia's special guardians. Unfortunately, our process was stopped in its tracks when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

Six months after his death, I spoke again to my niece who told me Olivia had been matched with a couple, but they had withdrawn their interest in her. I contacted social services to say I'd like to restart the process. They told me that adoption was the only route of permanence for Olivia.

Olivia came home to me nine months ago, aged two. I thought it would be easy as I have three grown children, but it was a shock to the system. I'd forgotten how energetic toddlers are and how much attention they need! I bubbled with my son during the pandemic, which has been a big help. Friends regularly check that I'm OK and social services have been amazing.

Olivia sees her birth parents face-to-face three times a year. We're still family so we talk a lot over the phone. Olivia's birth mum and I have had a few disagreements – she contested the adoption – but mostly it's amicable.

People think I have done an amazing thing, but I just didn't want her to go through what I did. I'd have been devastated if Olivia was no longer part of our family. She's three years old now and a real little star. She makes me laugh every day.

Real name: Martin

Location: Wales

Willing to do media interviews and be identified.

Subject: Adopted young person, contact with birth family

I've recently connected with a half-sister I didn't even know existed. I'm quite a chatty person, open to meeting new people, but our conversation was a bit strange. I didn't know what to expect, although I added her on Facebook. It felt weird, and it still does.

One of my other sisters, who has the same adoptive parents as me, tracked down our birth mum. She went to our birth mum's house to introduce herself and then got her to call me, completely out of the blue.

The whole thing felt inappropriate and overwhelming. In my final year at university, I just didn't need this distraction. I had to say that I was sorry and although I appreciated the phone call, I would rather have connected with her in a more organised way.

The way it happened made it so awkward. My birth mother asked if she could text me, which I agreed to, but then she wanted to call me again, which I was not comfortable with.

I'd advise any adopted young person thinking of meeting their birth relatives to go through the relevant professionals so that they can receive the help and support they will need. It'll work out better in the long run.

Real name: Ans Aspden

Location: Wales

Willing to do media interviews and be identified

Subject: Adopted person and adoptive parent, identity, tracing birth parents, contact,

I was adopted as a baby in 1971 and had a happy childhood. My parents were very open about my adoption, but we never discussed my birth parents.

During my teenage years, I struggled with my identity. I didn't fit in at school and felt people didn't understand me. I knew my birth mother's name, but didn't want to hurt my parents, so I'd secretly rifle through telephone directories to try to find her.

After leaving home, I realised I needed to know where I'd come from and who I am. I couldn't mention this to my parents though as I thought they'd feel threatened. After a decade of searching, it was only after a chance conversation with a taxi driver who was from the same area as my birth mother that we were reunited.

I was 30 when I opened Pandora's box. There was no emotional or intermediary support from social services back then, just factual information. It was raw and I wasn't ready for what happened next.

It was like a time warp, with everyone being transported back to the 1970s. My birth mother hadn't seen me since I was a few weeks old. She gave me a silver picture frame with a photograph of her holding me as a baby. She'd never wanted to give me up.

When I met my birth father, I noticed he had the same pigmentation as my daughter. The first thing he asked me was, 'What do you want?'

We invited my birth parents and my parents to my daughter's christening. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. Now, I have strong relationships with my birth parents, and we see each other regularly, but I wonder if it would have been as awkward if my parents had been more candid about my birth parents when I was a child?