

## The Adoption Assessment or Home Study

Deciding to adopt a child is a huge step. Naturally, potential adopters are apprehensive about what adoption entails, and in order to lessen this anxiety we believe in being as open as possible about the adoption process. For this reason the coverage given is quite detailed and lengthy.

### Introduction

It might be helpful to take a brief overview of the various stages potential adopters go through during the assessment process. Please bear in mind that the following is a generalisation and that not every agency (social services department or other adoption agency) will always fit this pattern.

### The First Step

Assuming that you fulfil your agency's basic criteria (e.g on age, health, residence in the U.K, etc.) and are deemed after a brief interview or discussion on the telephone to be a potential candidate, you will probably be invited along to an introduction to adoption meeting. This meeting will give you the opportunity to find out quite a bit more about adoption and to ask as many questions as you want about the process, to find out what the agencies are looking for in prospective adopters, how ways in which adoption can become the plan for a child, etc. If at the conclusion of the meeting or shortly afterwards you wish to pursue your interest further you may be invited to attend a 'preparation for adoption group'.

### The Preparing for Adoption Group

These groups consist of prospective adopters like yourself and agency staff, and exist to acquaint you with the range of issues surrounding adoption. These groups tend to meet between 4 to 6 times, usually spaced over several weeks. You will usually get the opportunity to meet parents who have already adopted a child, and you may well have the chance to listen to visiting specialist speakers. The groups are a chance for you to question your own attitudes and beliefs in relation to children and adoption. They are also a chance for the agency staff to start to get to know you.

After the sessions you may be asked to think about your application a bit more, and then confirm to your agency your willingness to continue. Most agencies will not accept your application immediately, they want you to go home and to think about all you have seen and heard and to discuss the issues with your partner (if applicable) as well as family and friends.

### Home Visits

The next stage, should you decide to continue is when you begin to receive 'home visits' from your agency social worker. Your social worker will talk to members of your household both individually and together during these visits.

Bear in mind throughout this stage that the entire assessment process is not

solely about deciding whether or not you will make 'suitable' adopter(s) - it is also about providing you with information in order that you can decide whether or not adopting a child is right for you and your family.

The primary purpose of these home visits is to build up a comprehensive profile of you and the parenting environment you can provide, and to determine the type of child(ren) whose needs you will best meet. Most social workers will assess your suitability to be an adoptive parent using a document often referred to as the "Form F".

Throughout this stage and in cooperation with you, your social worker will start to fill in your Form F. Upon completion if there are any points of disagreement between you and your social worker they can be recorded. Finally, having read and agreed to what has been written, all sign the document.

Over the next few pages we shall examine the assessment procedure, and in particular the structure and content of the form F which, once completed, is the major part of a final report that is submitted to the adoption panel.

It is important to point out that your social worker's role is to assist you through the adoption process, and to identify your needs and abilities to see if these can be matched to a child's needs. Ideally you will build up a close and honest relationship with your social worker, and the finalised Form F will reflect this, being arrived at by mutual agreement.

The whole process, from first home visit to being recommended by the Adoption Panel and then finally being approved by the Decision Maker, can take anywhere from about 6 months to over a year, depending on the agency, and on such things as how long you had to wait for the Adoption Panel meeting to consider your application.

### The Assessment Form

The commonly used assessment form consists of five parts, which are summarised over the next few pages. Bear in mind that although the form is extremely comprehensive (which is understandable in the circumstances) your agency social worker is there to assist you through it. Try to view the report as a joint venture, while acknowledging that most agency social workers will feel quite comfortable compiling the report, after all they have probably done it many times. You on the other hand will be stepping into totally unfamiliar territory. Remember too that you are not expected to be 'perfect applicants' - social workers are not looking for them either. Many know that they do not exist! Social workers look for, and often use the term 'good enough' parent to mean one who is both suitable to adopt and has the experience or potential to parent a child/ren.

### Part 1.

This part of the form gives factual information about you. Your agency social

worker and you are asked to:

1) Provide details of your adoption agency.

2) Your details.

These include the language you speak at home, your religion, ethnic descent, occupation, and current or proposed hours of work. You are also asked to provide a recent photograph of yourself.

3) Outline of the children in your household.

This includes their ethnic descent, the type of school they go to, and their relationship to you.

4) State what type of care you are offering.

There are several options - including 'adoption', 'long-term fostering', 'adoption (with an adoption allowance)', etc.

5a) Consider the type of child or children that you will be eligible to adopt.

There is a detailed checklist included, which is to be completed only after a full discussion has taken place between you and the agency social worker regarding the issues involved. The checklist is intended to reflect a mutually-agreed position between you and the agency, outlining what you all agree would be the most appropriate type of child(ren) for you to adopt.

It begins with an outline of the children:

First, the age range - for example, that you will be allowed to adopt a child or children between the ages of 4 and 9. If you already have children all adoption agencies will want any adopted child to be at least two years younger than the youngest. Some agencies insist on a greater age gap.

Secondly, the number of children you will be allowed to adopt - one or perhaps a family group of two or three, or even more.

Thirdly, what gender child(ren) will you be suitable to adopt

Fourthly, would you be capable of looking after a child or children from a different ethnic or religious background to yourself?

There then follows a comprehensive checklist

Detailing various possible characteristics and backgrounds which you and the agency agree it would or would not be appropriate for you to consider in an adoptive child. There are over forty possibilities, so the following is only a selection:

Child with hearing impairment.

Child with severe learning difficulties.

Child who may have been physically abused.

Child who is unlikely to make relationships easily. etc.

5b) Description of you and your family.

This covers you and your family's personalities, interests, experiences etc. It is

designed to be a 'snapshot' of your family that will aid your adoption agency in the initial stages of matching you with a child.

6) Provide details of any other children.

For example, details of any of your children living elsewhere.

7) Provide details of other adult members who are part of your household.

For example, grandparents living in your home or a lodger.

8) Detail of other significant adults who will have contact with any child of your household on a regular basis.

For example, a neighbour or a close friend who visits you frequently, or perhaps a baby sitter you use for children within the family.

9) Detail your accommodation, neighbourhood and mobility.

You need to outline your neighbourhood - its ethnic composition, its schools and recreational facilities, and the public transport that is available to you. You are then required to give a simple description of your accommodation and the proposed sleeping arrangements for your child. You are asked for health and safety information, and finally whether or not you intend to move house in the near future: and if so, what the implications of such a move would be for any child placed with you.

10) Detail any restrictions on pets.

What pets do you already have (if any), and would there be any limitations placed on a child who might bring a pet with her / him?

11a) Confirm whether or not you have a permanent home in the U.K, Channel Islands or Isle of Man.

This is necessary for anyone who wishes to adopt in England or Wales. You also need to provide your date of birth and marital status, with confirmation that the appropriate documentation has been seen by the social worker.

11b) Describe your work and educational history.

This includes periods of raising a family, unemployment, part-time employment and voluntary work. You must also provide your National Insurance number for confirmation of these (where applicable).

11c) Detail the various compulsory checks that have been carried out.

These statutory references include police checks and personal referees. If you have a criminal record you need to make the agency aware of this and ask them if this would stop you being able to adopt. In many cases as long as you have not committed an offence recently and the offence did not involve violence against a child the agency may still be prepared to consider your application. You will also be expected to take a medical and complete a medical questionnaire. If you have concerns about a previous illness affecting your application you should speak to

your GP about it. You may also have to prove that your mortgage payments (where applicable) are up to date. Other areas that may be checked include education and employer references (where applicable).

12) List detail of your home visits.

This includes the number of times the visits have taken place, and who was seen at each one.

The number and type of preparation group meetings attended, and to describe the ethnic mix of the group and aspects of the training covered, as well as your participation and what you felt had been useful. Any further areas of training that might be required should also be identified.

Finally, for those who have not had the opportunity to attend a preparation group there is a chance to list what preparation or training has been utilised instead.

13) Details of medical information.

The date of your medical examination, comments from the agency medical adviser, details of any physical, mental or emotional disabilities within your extended family, and details of any disabled children.

14) Give details of personal referees.

You are asked for the referees' relationship to you, the time that they have known you, and comments on the information they have provided. In England and Wales there is a requirement for the referees to be personally interviewed by the agency social worker, and a record of these visits should be attached to the form.

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Part 3.

This part of the form is for applicant(s) who intend to adopt a disabled child. (Note on terms used: 'impairment' means limitations caused by a physical, mental or sensory condition; 'disabled' describes how society views such individuals).

Your agency social worker and you will be asked to:

1) Provide details of experience of disability

What is your attitude towards disability? What do you understand by the 'social model of disability' (which proposes that being defined as 'disabled' stems from society's view of the disabled person as a 'problem') and would you be able and willing to incorporate such a viewpoint into the care of your child?

2) Describe how you are likely to perceive the child.

How capable are you of seeing beyond a child's disability? What expectations of a child's development are you likely to have, and how accepting of a child's condition are you likely to be?

If you are able and willing to look after a child with a life-threatening condition, how aware are you of the implications of this, and how might you cope - for example - with the death of your child?

3) Detail your views on adolescence and the disabled younger person.  
Do you have an understanding of the importance of friendships, education and independence for the disabled younger person, and how might you be able to assist the disabled younger person in achieving these?

4) Describe how you understand discrimination.  
How will you encourage participation in activities, such as clubs or sports. How do you demonstrate positive attitudes towards disability? How will you nurture a child's self-esteem, and how are you likely to react to discrimination against your child? How will you prepare your child to cope with discrimination from within the community?

5) Outline how you would expect to minimise the risk of abuse.  
How aware are you of the risk of abuse (e.g physical, sexual, emotional) to a disabled child? How would you minimise that risk, and how would you help your child to communicate any problems or difficulties?

6) Indicate whether or not you are willing to consider a child who may have special educational needs  
Would you require help in understanding the statementing/recording process? Do you understand the importance of being an advocate for the child - i.e of representing the child's interests to the best of your abilities?

7) Suggest what practical support you will need to look after a disabled child.  
For example, ramps, bathroom facilities, transport, etc. Where a specific child is under consideration indicate whether or not any existing assessment has highlighted specific practical support that might be required.

8) State how confident you would be in looking after a child with an impairment within the following areas :

- a. Eating - for example, dietary restrictions or needing to be fed by a tube.
- b. Mobility - for example, being unable to stand unaided, or having behavioural difficulties which impede mobility.
- c. Personal care - for example, needing incontinence aids or assistance with a colostomy.
- d. Communication - for example, having dysphasia or needing to use sign language.
- e. Sleep - for example, waking frequently.
- f. Behaviour - for example, hyperactivity, having no sense of danger.
- g. Identity - for example, needing help with anxiety, or with self-esteem.
- h. Having a deteriorating or life-threatening condition.
- i. Having a specific impairment, such as Epilepsy or Spina Bifida.
- j. Having a sensory impairment, such as being blind.

Are you willing to attend post-approval courses in order to keep up with current

practices? What is your understanding of how birth parents might react to their child's impairment - for example, with rejection. How might this affect a relationship between you and the birth parents?

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#### Part 4.

Part 4 summarises evidence of various abilities necessary when looking after an adopted child. This evidence should be collected primarily by you, with guidance from your agency social worker, and should be stored in a portfolio. It is intended that the summary of this evidence as recorded here and the summary and NOT the portfolio will be presented to the Adoption Panel.

Your agency social worker will note the type of evidence, its relevance and its adequacy, for each of the areas under consideration. This will give an indication of your 'competence' in each of these areas. The purpose of this is for you to gain a clear understanding of the skills, knowledge and experience required by adoptive parents. Where there are identified shortcomings an action plan will be drawn up, detailing how these shortcomings can be remedied.

Your agency social worker will be asked to detail 'competences' with regard to the following abilities:

#### 1) Caring for children.

You need to be able to provide a good standard of care throughout childhood and into adulthood. You will need an understanding of child development, the ability to communicate with children appropriate to that development, and the ability to set appropriate boundaries and manage your child(ren) within those boundaries.

#### 2) Providing a safe and caring environment.

You must be able to care for children in an environment where the children are safe from harm or abuse, be capable of educating children to protect themselves from and to seek help if threatened by such abuse, and be able to recognise the vulnerability of disabled children to abuse and to discrimination.

#### 3) Working as part of a team

You need to be able to work with other individuals and organisations, be able to communicate effectively, keep information confidential and be able to act as an advocate for the child. You must also have an understanding of racism and discrimination, and be able to promote an anti-discriminatory and anti-racist approach to parenting.

#### 4) An understanding of adoption as a life-long process

You must be able to understand a child's needs in relation to his or her background, and be able to assist in meeting those needs. You must be able to promote the development of the child to adulthood, and be able to show an understanding of adoption as a life-long process. You must be able to seek appropriate post-adoption support where necessary.

#### 5) Own development.

You must have an awareness of how personal experiences have affected your own development, and of how adoption will be likely to affect you and your family. You should be able to create a support network within your community to help you in your adoption task, be able to take up training opportunities, and cope under stress.

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#### Part 5.

Part 5 is a summary of the whole form.

Your agency social worker will be asked to detail how you relate to children, and how well you will work with the agency, the birth parents, and other significant adults. What are your strengths and weaknesses, and in what areas might you experience difficulties? What are the agency social worker's recommendations? Finally, are there any points of disagreement between you and the agency social worker?

You and the social worker upon completion will then sign the form.

Adoption and Fostering Information Line

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