



# Early Placement Support

## Advice and guidance for new adopters...

- Understanding developmental trauma and therapeutic parenting
- Building new attachments through sensory play and Theraplay ®
- Talking to your child about adoption
- Beginning to lay the foundations for life story work
- Post adoption support and the Adoption Support Fund
- How to access further support



# Contents

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Top tips for new adopters and growing families	4
Developmental trauma	7
Therapeutic parenting	9
How can therapeutic parenting help?	12
Theraplay ®	13
Sensory play	14
The Adoption Support Fund	16
Talking about adoption with your child	19
Your child's life story	21
The Letterbox Service	23
Sources of support - The Adopter Hub	26
Contact Adopt South West	27

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# Welcome

This guide has been developed to give you some practical tips, information and advice while you learn to navigate the early days of family life with a new member. We have included details of the support you can access from us here at Adopt South West, as well as links to organisations and resources that other adopters have found helpful and have recommended.

We understand that when you adopt a child/children, there is a lot to learn about them in a relatively short time. During this time, you will also discover that there is a lot you will learn about yourselves and if you are part of a couple, each other.

We hope that this guide will support your understanding and knowledge of what it means to adopt, what to expect and where to turn if you would like support from other adopters, professionals, or both.

The information we have included is intended to give you an overview on the topics that come up most frequently during early placement support. We have suggested further resources, should you wish to learn more about any of these areas.





# Top tips for new adopters and growing families

To my family,

Here are some top tips to help us when I come to live with you!

It might take a little while...

Please be patient - it will take time for me to trust you and to know that you love me and that I am safe with you. What you say and do will make all the difference to what I say, do and feel.

## How to be with me

Please try not to shout as it can remind me of scary times.

- Make me feel like I belong by saying 'in our family we do...' for example:  
"This is a family where we like quiet time and reading before bed".  
"In our family we take turns. In our family we sit down together to eat dinner".  
This is important because I need to feel like I am part of the family.
- Encourage me by being positive for example "please walk" instead of "don't run". If you do need to say "no" please be calm and firm.
- If I have been naughty, please don't punish me, instead help me learn what happens if I do something wrong. For example, if I throw my dinner on the floor, I need to clear it up, with your help.
- Have 'time in' not 'time out'. I don't know how to make 'good choices', I often make poor ones as a way of staying safe. I need your help to do this, so please do not punish by making me feel bad, as I do so already.
- Sometimes I have very big feelings, sometimes I can feel very 'yucky' inside – angry, confused, mixed up, sad, worried anxious.

## Help me talk to you about my feelings

Sometimes I might get really angry and have a tantrum. Sometimes the things I say or do might make you angry and upset. You can help me by staying calm. This will help me to feel safe with you. Please just hold me, hug me, and make me feel safe. I might even be able to talk to you about what I am feeling.

Feelings big and small, I need your help with all of them. Talking about my feelings will help me to recognise and understand them. With your help we can find a way for me to manage them safely. That way you will feel safe to love me.

## Big feelings

I sometimes have big feelings that I may not know how to deal with. This is because I haven't learnt how to feel these big feelings and they overwhelm me. I need your help to understand what I'm feeling by talking to me about them.

Here are some examples of the sort of thing you could say:

"It really is hard for you when I have to say no, but I would really like to understand why you did it, let's talk about it".

"I see you are angry because you threw your dinner on the floor. Let's clear it up together and talk about what made you so angry".

## It's OK to talk to me about my birth family, if I want to

Please talk to me about my birth family and help me to remember them, in a way that I feel safe to do so.

If I feel sad at celebrations for example birthdays and Christmas, please talk to me about this. It might be that I am thinking about my birth family. I may still think about them even if I don't live with them. It doesn't mean I don't love you or want to live here.

Please don't judge them because it will feel like you are judging me.

## It's OK to talk to me about my foster carers too

I may have spent longer living with my foster carers than I did with my birth family. They are very important to me, and I will miss them very much.

I may need help to understand that they haven't disappeared and that they are still thinking of me. I may need to see them or speak to them occasionally. A few photos of the important people in my life will really help me feel more secure when I come to live with you.

I have a big enough heart to love you all!

## Learning to be a family

It will take time for you to love me and for me to love you. Practice saying you love me and if you say 'I love you' often enough one day I might be able to say it back.

When I am ready, I would like lots of hugs that will help me to feel like I belong and that I am part of your family.

## Family time

Doing physical activities together as a family, like feeding the ducks or going to the park, will help us bond and might even help me to be happy and sleep better. I might not be able to cope if these days out are very long or too exciting and I may need to go home sooner than you had planned.

Some engaging things we could do together to help us feel closer are clapping games, three-legged walk, follow the leader, funny ways to cross the room, hokey kokey, foil prints, mother may I, peek-a-boo, piggyback, row your boat, face painting, lullabies, patty-cake, cotton ball hockey, hide something and find it, and this little piggy or similar games.

## My routine

It is really important for me to have a routine that I am used to because it helps me to feel safe.

When we do new things, you can help me by explaining what will happen and when - make sure to keep parts of my normal routine too. Sometimes if we are doing something exciting, I might be worried, so if we are going out for the day it might be helpful to know we are coming back. You could use pictures to show me what is happening.

Give me a warning or a countdown when things are going to happen, as this will help me to feel less anxious.

Bedtime is my quiet time. No television or electronic games! I like to have a bedtime story and hugs and quiet time with you.

## Remember!

Please talk about feelings all the time. Giving me words to explain what I am feeling will help me make sense of them, but you may have to name them a lot. It's very important for us as a family that you do.

Don't worry about saying the wrong thing, I'll soon tell you if you do.

# Developmental trauma

## What is developmental trauma?

When children experience early loss, separation, abuse or neglect their brain development is affected in significant ways. They often experience what is known as developmental trauma, which means their development has gone off track and they cannot behave, feel, relate, and learn like other children their age. New research has shown that unborn babies can suffer trauma to their developing mind and body when they are in the womb, for example, if their birth mother was in a violent relationship, used alcohol and substances, has a history of trauma herself, suffered serious mental health problems or toxic stress.

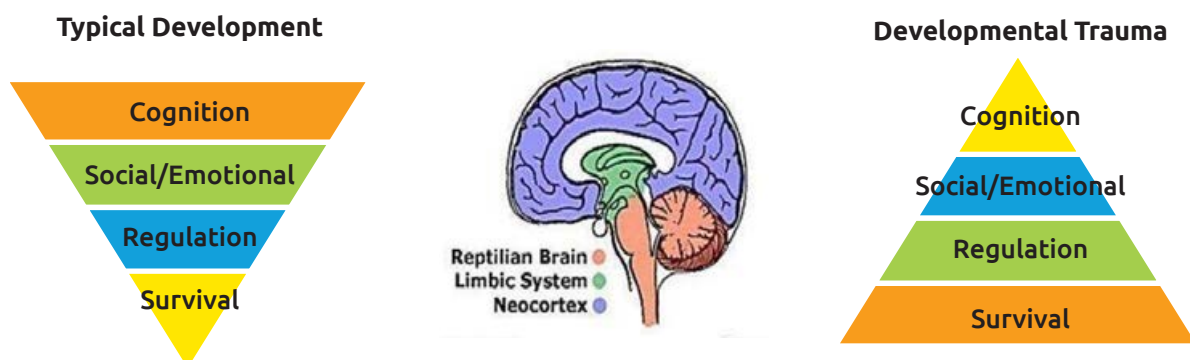
The impact of early loss, separation, abuse, and neglect continues for children even after they have entered foster care and moved to adoptive families. Therefore, your child may have come to you with the ongoing effects of developmental trauma. Understanding this will help you in caring for your child.

Developmental trauma affects children differently at different ages depending on their personality and early relationship experiences. Being removed from their family, even when the environment is unsafe, is also traumatic and scary for a child. Most children love their parents regardless of the quality of their relationships; consequently, being removed creates further stress, grief and loss and can overwhelm the child's capacity to cope.

Children who have experienced trauma will come to you with different behaviours, ways of doing and saying things, ways of relating to people and ways of coping with stress compared to children who haven't experienced trauma. Due to the trauma they have experienced, they cannot interpret the 'learning area' of the brain.

The diagram below demonstrates how the brain develops and functions differently in children who have experienced early trauma.

## Trauma and Brain Development



Adapted from Holt and Jordan, Ohio Dept. of Education

Associations both positive and negative are built from a very young age and are influenced by what you do verbally and non-verbally.

Due to your child's earlier life experiences, they may have missed some important stages of their development. This could mean that they may be behind and will need to re-visit the stages that they have missed to catch up. You can have a great time discovering and learning about the world together as a family so that your child makes up for these missed developmental stages.

You can expand on the information you give to your child as they get older, responding to their level of understanding and the questions they may ask. As they grow, you will need to share more of their history with them, again being sensitive to their level of understanding.

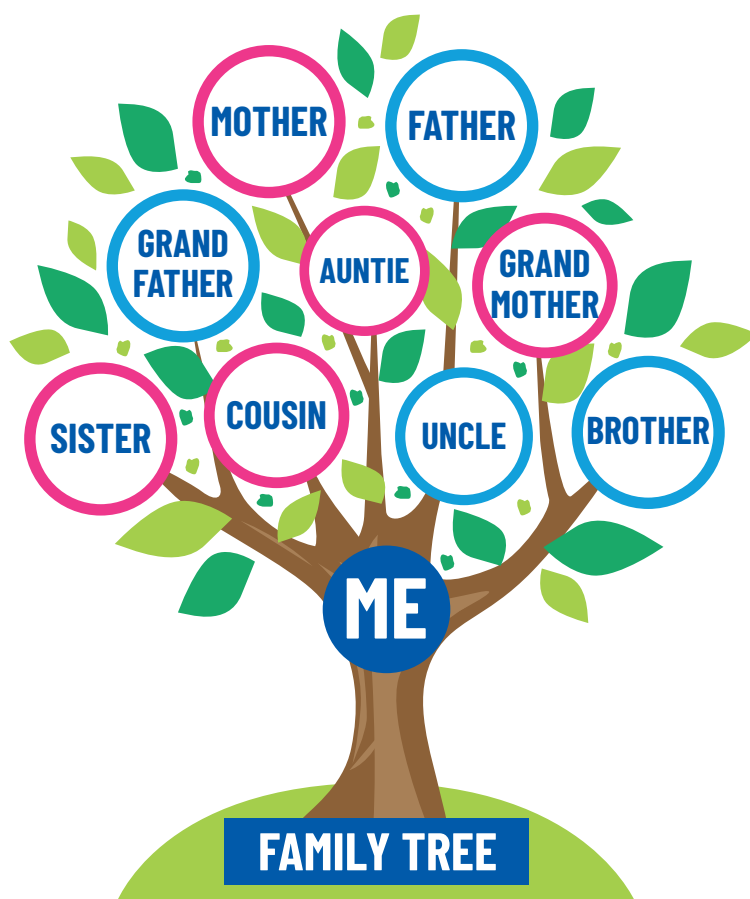
Talk to your child about their feelings and help them to express them. At this stage you may notice your child's behaviour changes as they begin to realise the significance of their story. This is a result of them beginning to understand the issue of loss and grief and what adoption means for them. For many, this will mean that they are entering the grieving process for their birth family for the first time.

## How you feel

As adoptive parents it is normal for you to experience a whole range of feelings at different stages. It is important that you express and discuss these feelings with your partner or friends.

Your child may well want to talk about their birth family, and you may feel threatened by this. Try to remember that your child developing an interest in and asking questions about their past doesn't mean that they are not happy with you.

Speaking with your child about adoption may not always be easy, but that does not mean it should be avoided. Understanding their history is essential to help them to build a solid sense of identity. As their parent you are the best person to help them achieve this.





# Therapeutic parenting

Traditional parenting techniques will have a limited effect for children who have suffered trauma because of their early life experiences. This approach could also make the behaviours and associated feelings worse, rather than better for the child.

Therapeutic parenting is a different way of parenting. It aims to support children to recover from their past experiences of trauma. To achieve this, a therapeutic model such as PACE, which was developed by Dr Dan Hughes is used. This helps to create a feeling of connection between parent and child.

## PACE stands for...

### Playfulness

This is achieved by portraying interest whilst using a light tone. As if you are telling a story when you communicate. Playfulness can help to keep situations in perspective and a playful stance can also help to diffuse a tense or difficult situation, when used to de-escalate at an appropriate time.

### Acceptance

This is about communicating acceptance, without judgement of the intentions (eg; thoughts, feelings, perceptions and motives) behind the behaviour. Rather than of the outward behaviour itself, which may still be limited through the introduction of firm boundaries. Acceptance helps the child to realise that they themselves are not 'bad' or 'unlovable'. Feeling accepted unconditionally is central to a child's sense of safety.

### Curiosity

This is how we help children to become aware of and reflect upon the reasons for their behaviour. Terms such as 'I wonder what you think that might have been about?' or 'I wonder why you feel like that?' might be used to explore the need behind the behaviour with the child. This helps to create a mutual insight and understanding, whilst linking their behaviours to their needs, which will likely be a result of their early life experiences.

### Empathy

Being empathetic means being with the child through difficult situations and feeling their emotions with them. Using empathy establishes a connection with the child. It lets them know that we recognise their perspective and recognise the emotions that they are feeling, whilst communicating that we understand, and we know what it's like to feel that way. It is easy to confuse empathy with sympathy. Dr Brené Brown describes the difference perfectly in this short YouTube video clip: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw)



Over the following pages we have included some therapeutic parenting suggestions and strategies which may be helpful to you. Here are some therapeutic parenting strategies which you may find helpful.

- Be aware of your own stress levels before responding to your child.
- Be consistent, predictable, and repetitive. Your child will most likely be sensitive to changes in plans, transitions and new or chaotic situations. Consistency and predictability will help your child to feel safe and secure, for example, have the same bedtime, mealtimes, and routines. Warn them in advance about a change in plans. Avoid places where there are a lot of people and things to do, particularly in the first few months of them joining their new family. These strategies will assist in the healing process.
- Time-in not time-out. The child is not deliberately seeking attention, they are needing attention. Bringing a stressed and scared child to you will help them feel safe and secure, whilst helping them to think about their actions and feel more connected to you. Sending a stressed child to time out will make the situation worse. Children who have come through the care system were often left alone, so time out can trigger negative feelings and thoughts.

- Stop, Listen and Talk with your child. It will help to open conversations about what they are feeling. Explain what you see, this will help to develop language about their feelings, for example, “You look sad today, I can tell because you have tears in your eyes”
- Parent based on emotional age, if your child is stressed or fearful, they may regress to a younger age. You will be better able to soothe them if you parent them as if they were at that age, for example, putting a 10-year-old on your lap and giving them a hug and a rock may be just what they need.
- Help your child to develop appropriate social behaviours by modelling them yourself and telling them what and why you are doing this (for example, I am going to wash my hands before dinner because...)
- Have realistic expectations of your child. Children with abuse and neglect backgrounds already have several hurdles to overcome and some may not overcome all of them.
- Be patient, progress may be slow.

## Further therapeutic parenting resources

Adopt South West run therapeutic parenting courses throughout the region, to help adopters to expand their knowledge. This service can be funded through the Adoption Support Fund. Please speak to your assessing social worker for more information.

Recommended books include:

- Therapeutic Parenting in a Nutshell by Sarah Naish
- The A-Z of Therapeutic Parenting by Sarah Naish
- The Simple Guide to Child Trauma: What It Is and How to Help
- The Simple Guide to Understanding Shame in Children: What It Is, What Helps and How to Prevent Further Stress or Trauma
- The Simple Guide to Attachment Difficulties in Children: What They Are and How to Help - all written by Betsy de Thierry

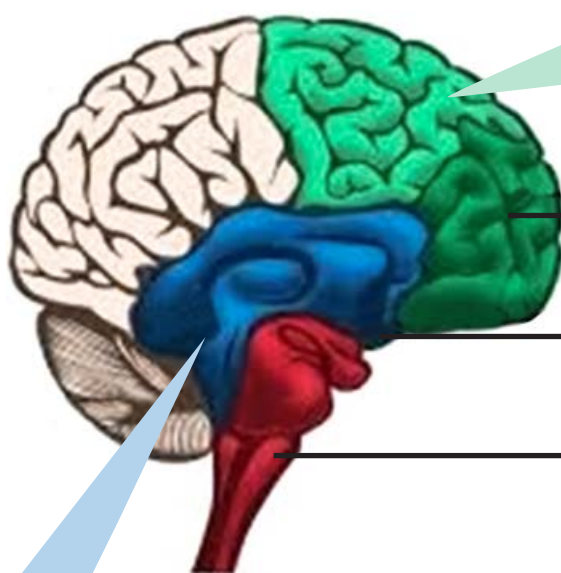
# How can therapeutic parenting help?

Early traumatic events can have a profound effect on the way that a child's brain develops and functions. A brain that develops during traumatic experiences or in an unpredictable environment will do so in overdrive, sensing fear everywhere, even after the threat has passed.

This leads to physiological responses in the brain, which trigger the outward behaviours, or 'survival strategies'. These responses become hardwired, as the brain becomes locked in survival state (known as the amygdala area of the brain) for much of the time, whilst the child attempts to keep themselves safe. The higher functioning areas of the brain go offline during this time. Literally disconnecting from the rest of the brain.

Unfortunately, children cannot just 'unlearn' these hardwired physiological responses. This is where therapeutic parenting comes in. As a trauma informed way of parenting, it aims to help the child to move from the base of the brain, where they are trapped in survival state, through the emotional state and finally into the higher functioning 'learning area' of the brain, known as the pre-frontal lobe. Once they reach this area, the child may be supported to explore and link their feelings to their behaviours and learn from their experiences.

Over a prolonged period, this effectively helps to form new neurological pathways. Essentially rewiring the brain, so the child learns to function more in the learning area, switching back to 'survival mode' only when there is an actual threat.



## The Prefrontal lobe

This area is linked to critical functions, such as memory, attention, decision making, reasoning and reflecting.

## Executive State

Prefrontal Lobes  
What can I learn from this?

## Emotional State

Limbic System  
Am I loved?

## Survival State

Brain System  
Am I safe?

## The Limbic System

This area is responsible for our emotional development, behaviour control and ability to build and maintain relationships.

## The Amygdale

This area is responsible for keeping us alive when we are in danger. It does this by taking us into a fight, flight or freeze state.



## Theraplay ®

Theraplay ® aims to build upon attachment, self-esteem, trust in others and joyful engagement. It offers a way for you to connect with your child through simple games. Where you can share enjoyment, playful interaction, and nurturing touch.

The intention is to encourage children to focus on the positive aspects of themselves, so that they may view themselves as worthy and lovable. This is achieved through positive interactions and rewarding relationships, which are created through play.



### Interactions focus on four essential qualities found in parent-child relationships.

**Structure:** The predictable sequence and rhythm of activities helps the child to become physically regulated.

**Engagement:** The parent focuses on the child in an exclusive way, providing sensitively timed, soothing and delightful interactions. This helps them to attune to the child's state and respond in a way that encourages the child to regulate and integrate physical and emotional states.

**Nurture:** Activities are soothing, calming, quieting and reassuring. This makes the world feel safe, predictable and secure. The child develops the expectation that "people will take care of me" and "good things happen to me".

**Challenge:** Activities encourage the child to extend themselves a little bit, in a developmentally appropriate way. The child is also given opportunities to master attention arousing experiences (such as peek-a-boo).

Here are some suggestions for Theraplay ® activities. It might be best to begin with activities which involve less physical contact, building up slowly to those that require more contact. You will then be able to follow your child's cues and judge whether they are comfortable with the activity. Stop if your child seems distressed and do not attempt with a child who has been abused in any way.

**Mirror:** One of you is the person, the other is the mirror, and you mimic the person's actions. You could make funny faces, wave hands, etc. You could even sign "I love you". Point to your eyes, make a heart, and point to the child.



**Taco girl/boy:** She lays in the blanket aka taco shell. Then we put on the toppings, with different sounds for each. Hamburger, lettuce, tomato, cheese, sour cream, salsa, then wrap her up in the blanket. Next, pretend to “eat” the taco. Tickling and saying, “this is one very yummy taco” the whole time.

**Twinkle Twinkle:** Since the child is already laying in the blanket, one adult grabs the corners on their end, the other adult grabs the corners on their end. Lift up and sing, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star what a special child you are, up above the world so high, like a diamond in the sky, twinkle, twinkle, little star, what a special child you are”.

**Weather report:** The child sits facing away, and you sit behind them, facing their back. Draw out the weather on their back. Tickling, swishing, circling along the way. “Right now it is dark (hands down back) and there is a moon in the sky (draw the moon) there are also lots of twinkling stars (dot out the stars), and some clouds. too (clasp fingers together and blot clouds into the sky). Oh look, the sun is rising (draw the sun around the bottom of their back like it would be on the horizon, then it rising into the sky) and the wind is blowing (breeze fingers left and right across their back). You can get fun and creative with it.

## Sensory Play

Life is full of sensory experiences. Touch, movement, sight, sound, taste, and smell. If a child has difficulties making sense of this information, their behaviour may not meet the demands of the environment.

Adopted children who have had abusive and/or neglectful early lives can have a delay in their ability to understand and use their senses. This is linked with the way in which we learn about our bodies through sensitive attuned care in our early years.

If children have missed out on these experiences during their early years, they may continue to struggle with sensory integration. Therefore, lots of adopted children gravitate towards what we might think of as sensory activities for ‘younger children’, or even may have an aversion to sensory stimuli.



## **Exposing children to sensory play will not only help them develop and refine the use of their senses, but it will also help with:**

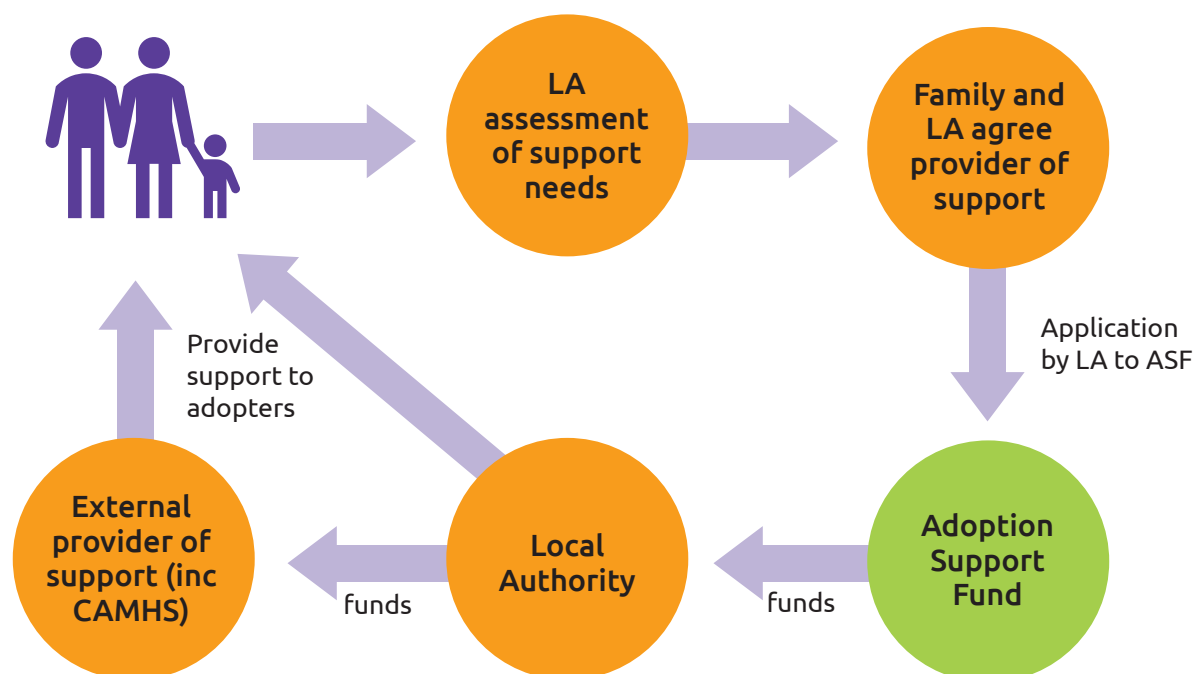
1. **Proximity** – Whichever sensory play activity you are doing, the fact is you are doing it together.
2. **Opportunities for eye contact** – Sensory play gives you the chance to get down to your child's level and connect with them through eye contact during activities
3. **Opportunities for sensory organisation** – Certain types of sensory play can be “organising” for children who struggle with sensory processing. For children who struggle with having a high/low level of arousal or a short attention span, sensory play activities can unlock their ability to be “available” for interaction and engagement.
4. **Language development** – Talking, listening and turn taking during sensory play, will give you the opportunity to connect.
5. **Developing trust and making memories** – Sensory play provides opportunities for building a relationship with those children who love exploring new things, as well as with the ones who may be fearful of or hesitant about new sensory experiences. Sensory play also supports the development of trust, as your child learns that you will not push them past what they are comfortable with.

Sensory play can also aid in building positive attachments between parent and child.

## **Here are some ideas for play experiences which will actively engage your child's senses:**

- Banging on pots and pans
- Shadow puppets
- Build a fort or tent
- Play catch with a balloon (or water balloon if outside)
- Explore how your child reacts to different smells. If they find some are soothing or alerting, get lotions, soaps, or candles to help regulate mood.
- Stuffed animal catch
- Tickle Fingers (trace fingers lightly over the skin)
- Make a touch book of different textures from your home
- Go on a texture walk
- Put dollops of different coloured paints in a zippy bag and squish around to mix the paints.

# The Adoption Support Fund



(courtesy of First4Adoption, 2020)

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) has been established because many families need therapeutic support following adoption and too many have struggled to get the help they need in the past. The Fund will enable them to access the services they need more easily in future.

## Who is eligible for the Adoption Support Fund?

The Fund is available for children living in England up to and including the age of 21 (or 25 with a Statement of Special Educational Needs or Education Health and Care Plan) who are:

- adopted and were previously in local authority care in England, Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland
- adopted from overseas
- under a Child Arrangement Order (CAO) to enable the assessment of a potential special guardian, while the CAO is in force
- subject to a Special Guardianship Order and were previously in care

## What do I need to do?

To access the Adoption Support Fund, you will need to have an assessment of your family's adoption support needs completed by the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA).

The local authority that places the child with you is responsible for assessing your adoption support needs for three years after the adoption order. After three years it becomes the responsibility of the local authority where you live (if different).

Where the assessment identifies that therapeutic services would be beneficial to your family, the RAA will apply to the Fund on your behalf, who will then release funding to the RAA.

The adoption social worker will be expected to talk to you about who can provide the types of service that you need and which provider you would prefer.

## Who provides the services?

Local authorities, independent providers (Ofsted registered or the local authority making the application assumes responsibility for quality assurance as an Ofsted registered organisation) and NHS provider, for example, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS – offering services within the scope of the Adoption Support Fund) can all provide services through the Adoption Support Fund.

## What support will I receive through the Adoption Support Fund (ASF)?

The Adoption Support Fund (ASF) will provide money to the RAA to fund a range of therapeutic services.

The amount per child per year is capped at £5000 for therapy, as well as a separate amount of up to £2,500 per child if specialist assessments are needed. Therapy and assessment above this amount and up to a limit of £30,000 requires match funding by the local authority.

The therapies funded are those identified to help achieve the following positive outcomes for you and your child:

- improved relationships with friends, family members, teachers, and school staff
- improved engagement with learning
- improved emotional regulation and behaviour management
- improved confidence and ability to enjoy a positive family life and social relationships

Therapeutic support and services which can be accessed via the ASF include, but are not limited to:

- Therapeutic parenting training
- Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy
- Theraplay ®
- Creative therapies such as art, music, drama, play
- Sensory integration therapy/Sensory attachment therapy

Where an assessment identifies that you may need other support, such as access to peer support groups, the RAA will be responsible for providing this, at their discretion, as is the situation now. The Pupil Premium is also available for children adopted from care, to help with your child's needs at school.

A referral may have already been made for you to attend Therapeutic Parenting sessions following your child being placed with you. Please speak with your Adopt South West worker if you would like to further discuss this, the ASF or the Pupil Premium in further detail.



# Talking about adoption with your child

You may wonder when the best time is to tell a child that they are adopted. At Adopt South West we believe it is never too early to talk about adoption with your child.

We understand that it may feel difficult to start a discussion in an age appropriate way with your child. A good way to begin is to include story books about adoption in your child's reading collection. You may find it helpful to use these books as a springboard, to introduce the concept of adoption into your everyday conversations.

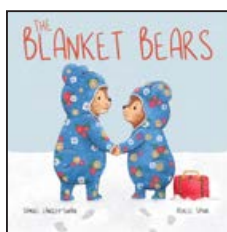
These early talks will not only help you to get used to talking about adoption, they will also help to build upon your child's understanding of their own journey and identity. Weaving small and open discussions into your child's usual routine via story books can help them to make sense of how adoption relates to them and their family. This may also encourage your child to feel that it is ok to discuss circumstances surrounding their own adoption and their feelings on the topic when they feel that they might wish to do so. This helps to build the foundations for life story work.

**Listed below are a selection of books that we recommend to help you get started.**



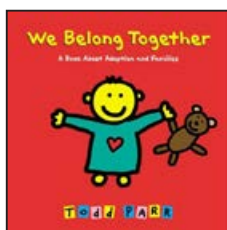
## The Teazles' Baby Bunny

This colourful picture book for young children aged two to four years old, tells the story of the Teazle rabbits and their adoption of a baby bunny. It is written in rhyme to make it easier for children to remember and repeat.



## The Blanket Bears, by Samuel Langley-Swain

A book for parents who want their children to understand adoption. Told through the eyes of two little bears who go on a 'typical' adoption journey, their happy ending is important for children going through their own journeys to have hope and also for friends, families and schools to understand their journeys better.



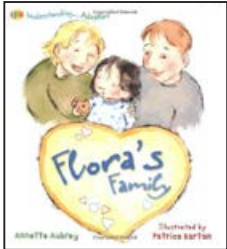
## We Belong Together

In a child friendly, accessible way, this book explores the ways that people can choose to come together to make a family.



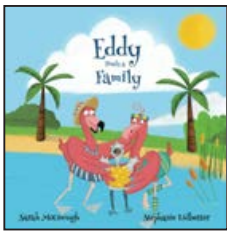
## My New Family

A book about adoption, including the variety of ways to make a family, the adoption process, and the importance of realising that both the adoptive parents and the birth parents love their children.



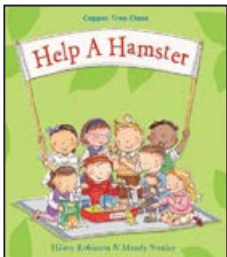
### Flora's Family

A lovely little book about adoption. Beautifully illustrated and written in rhyme. The book will answer important questions and open the way for a lot more.



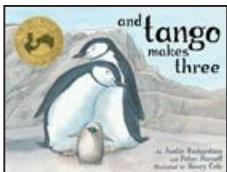
### Eddy Finds a Family by Sarah McGeough

This book gently explores the path to adoption for both parents and children. The simple narrative and engaging story follows the bright and colourful characters Flossy and Frank Flamingo and Eddy Emu as they find each other and become a family.



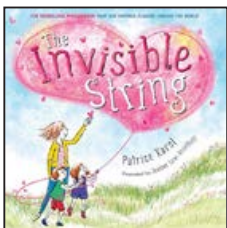
### Help a Hamster

Everyone had a big surprise when Henry, the class hamster, had four babies. Alfie Tate was adopted when he was little so he became the hamster monitor because Henry was finding it difficult to care for them. Find out how everyone helped Alfie to find new homes for the baby hamsters and what happened to the smallest, Alfonzo.



### And Tango Makes Three

A brilliantly simple, enjoyable and informative book. A great way to introduce same sex relationships and parenting.



### The Invisible String

This book offers an approach to helping children to address and overcome feelings of loss, grief and separation anxiety. These are feelings which could be associated with the moves and periods of uncertainty which they may have experienced during their short lives. This relatable story can help to provide a tool for addressing these feelings.

It is vital that your child is aware of his/her history and the moves they have experienced since being looked after. Talking with you about the characters in stories can help children to feel safe in thinking and talking about their own sad, angry, and frightened feelings.

# You child's life story

Your adoption social worker will no doubt have spoken to you about how important it is to be open with your child about their adoption from the very beginning.

An older child might already have some understanding of their situation when they come to live with you. If your child is young, they should be brought up with a knowledge of their past.

You will need to talk to them about their adoption, based upon their understanding at each stage of their development.

Whatever your child's age, it is important that you are familiar with their story and that you feel comfortable with it. If there are certain bits of the story that you find difficult then please take the time to practice telling the story to your partner/adoption social worker until you can comfortably share the story with your child.

Coming to terms with your feelings and anxieties is vital before you begin telling your child their story. Otherwise, they will pick up on and be affected by your anxieties. As a result, they may well associate them negatively with adoption.

## Talking with your child about their life story

The earlier you introduce the word 'adoption' and start to build upon your child's understanding the easier it will be.

You could start by telling your child bedtime stories about how they joined your family and how happy everyone was. You can say things like "You grew in Claire's tummy and then you came to live with us".

Your child may have gifts, toys, or photos from their foster carer or from birth relatives and you can use these as the basis for stories about their past.

Keep your child's life story book somewhere that they can easily get to. Sit down often with them to look through it and read it together.

If you have Letterbox contact with your child's birth family, sharing the information contained in these letters with your child can also provide plenty of opportunities for discussion.

If you are comfortable and positive about adoption, your child is likely to associate it with good things.





## Timing

You don't need to overload your child with all the details at once. These will emerge gradually over time if the topic is kept open within your family.

## Support with life story work

At Adopt South West, we offer regular life story drop-in sessions across the region. During these sessions you will have the opportunity to discuss your child's life story book face-to-face with a member of the team.

Whether you require advice on how and when to use your child's book, help with rewording to make it easier to share with your child or support and guidance to compile a life story book for those children who do not have one, we can help.

# The Letterbox Service

Letters from adoptive parents to birth parents or families. Please remember the exchanges are adult to adult.

It can sometimes be very difficult to sit down and write a letter to your child's birth parents/relatives. You may even feel that you are not very good at letter writing, like many of us. However, the information that you send is usually the only way that birth parents/relatives know how things are with the child. We hope these thoughts will help you with your letter writing.

Remember you are sharing information with someone who cares about your child, they are your child's birth parents/relatives, and not strangers. If you are proud of your child, you can get pleasure sharing that pride with their birth family. It is important to remember that this is a letter, not a formal report.

## A settling in letter

The settling in letter will usually be sent to a child's birth parent(s)/family within the first few months of your child coming to live with you. Writing this letter can seem daunting at first, as it may be the first contact you will have with the birth family. Below are some suggestions on things the birth family may like to hear about from you:

- what it was like when the child/ren first went to live with you (even if it was a little tricky, it is OK to say this as it makes you human)
- how they are doing now
- routines they are in
- if they are sleeping/eating well
- favourite things
- how they settled in to nursery/school and the new family
- it's always good to ask questions of the birth family as it makes them feel part of things
- reassurance that they are going to be loved and well looked after.

## Names

You may or may not have met with your child's birth family. It is perfectly acceptable to address them by their first names and to refer to yourselves by your first names. The name that you call the birth parent/relative, when talking to your child, is usually the best name to use in the letter.

## Addresses

If the birth parent(s)/relatives do not know your address or area in which you live, you should avoid making any reference to this in your letter. Surnames and addresses are deleted and photocopies sent on.





## Photographs

If photographs are included in the agreement, be generous in your choice of them. Most birth parents treasure the photographs they are sent. Clear and well produced photographs are important. It is always nice to know something about the photograph. Was it taken on holiday, or his/her birthday? Perhaps writing on the back of the photograph the year so that it will always be known when it was taken. Many birthparents/relatives like to receive school photographs as the quality of these is usually excellent, but please be aware that the uniform may be identifying.

## Contents of letter

What you write in your letter depends on the child's age. Over a period of six months or a year, all children make some progress and learn new skills. Try to include some details of new achievements and hobbies, particularly if you know that the new skill is one that is shared by the birth parent.

It is not always wise to mention any worries that you have about your child – the birth parent is powerless to do anything about them and may become anxious. However, all children get up to mischief and it can be helpful to build a more realistic picture if you include some amusing misdeeds.

Photographs can help a birth parent/relative to appreciate how the child is growing up but a written description of their physical development since the last letter is also important. Most birth parents feel reassured by the fact that their child is loved and well cared for, so do not feel reluctant to share the happy times in your letter.

If you have received a letter or photographs from the birth family it would be kind to acknowledge this in your next letter and mention that you have received them safely. It would be reassuring for the birth parents/relatives to know that letters that are sent, are being kept safely for your child.

As children get older they may want to contribute to your letter. Parents often need to take the initiative for this because children may not know what to say. If children do not talk about the birth families, it does not mean that they are not thinking about them. This will certainly reassure the birth parent that your child knows some of his/ her history and is aware that their birth parent is a real person. This may also help to open discussions with your child about his/her past.

You may want to include some of your child's art works from play group or school to share their achievements with his/her birth parents. Perhaps, as the child gets older, he/she could be encouraged to select the items to be included. This may be helpful for when they are 18 years old, as they will need to consider whether they wish to correspond with the birth parents.

Your letter does not need to be a lengthy work of literary genius. A proud and generous account of your child's progress since the last letter is something you can give the birth family. You might wish to keep a copy of your letter to remind you of what you have said.

## Time

The birth parents/relatives will be expecting to receive a letter from you at the agreed time. They may well be watching anxiously for the post. Please remember that it takes time to process the contact exchange. You need to allow at least two weeks for the post to arrive on time.

**We understand that you may like to discuss some aspects of letter writing, so please do feel that you can contact the post adoption worker who covers your area. Sometimes it helps just to talk ideas through.**

# Sources of Support

## The Adopter Hub



Registering for The Adopter Hub gives you access to:



peer support from other adopters via live web-chat, email and an exclusive adopter forum



a programme of webinars on topics ranging from severe behaviour to emotional resilience



webinars and focused information to help families on current topics



a wide range of resources on topics including behaviour, education, online safety, mental health and developmental needs



daily 'ask the team' sessions on a wide range of topics including adoption support, therapeutic parenting and strategies



resources for schools – a range of specific materials to help children in education.

Access to The Adopter Hub is via **[www.theadopterhub.org/request-login](http://www.theadopterhub.org/request-login)**

Please fill out the form, stating that you are associated with **Adopt South West** and quoting **1001**.

# Contact Adopt South West

## Telephone

For advice and support and any queries and/or requests relating to adoption support, please call **0345 155 1076** between the hours of **9.00am to 1.00pm, Monday to Friday**.

If you'd like to make an enquiry or request some information please use our online form and we'll get back to you. Or email **[adoptsouthwest@devon.gov.uk](mailto:adoptsouthwest@devon.gov.uk)**

## Website

**[www.adoptsouthwest.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.adoptsouthwest.org.uk/contact-us)**

## Newsletters

We send regular newsletters to all adopters with news of events around the region as well as other items of interest. We also send email updates, as and when needed. To subscribe to our Adopt South West newsletters please email **[adoptsouthwestsupport@devon.gov.uk](mailto:adoptsouthwestsupport@devon.gov.uk)**

## Social Media

We update our social media channels regularly with helpful material which includes handy advice and tips, family events and activities, articles of interest, and videos on the journeys of some of our adopters.

You can find and follow us on:



**[www.facebook.com/adoptsouthwest](https://www.facebook.com/adoptsouthwest)**



**[twitter.com/adoptsouthwest](https://twitter.com/adoptsouthwest)**



**[www.instagram.com/adopt\\_south\\_west](https://www.instagram.com/adopt_south_west)**



**[www.youtube.com/channel/UC-eNRGRadH3W0TTxXZ\\_r-UA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-eNRGRadH3W0TTxXZ_r-UA)**

