

# Taking time to prepare

**Bridget Betts is an independent social worker who has been in social work for 26 years. She is also an adopted person. Bridget explains how she works with parents on how to get ready for the arrival of their child...**



**Bridget has over 20 years of social work experience**

#### **Preparing family and friends**

I think that it is really important to involve children already in the family in the preparation process, particularly the older ones. I have usually worked with families where birth children, for example, have joined in at different times and been part of discussions. One family did a lot of thinking about how their birth children would react to their adoptive brother. There was lots of role play around 'what ifs', such as what if he's behaving in certain ways? It helped their birth

children connect with his feelings, and later on those birth children were key in helping him settle into the rules and routines of the household.

Extended family members may be keen to meet your child, but I would advise caution. It could be overwhelming for children to meet new

parents and grandparents as soon as they move in. In the first few weeks, the focus should be on those in the adoptive family home. Those outside that small circle should be introduced gradually, one by one, and on home territory. Take time to prepare friends and family for what your child has been through, how they feel, and how they may behave. The 'family book' is a very important tool during introductions and, if used well, will help your child begin to understand who is part of their new family.

#### **Assessing your child's needs**

I worked with a family who had three birth children and adopted three disabled children. This involved a lot of work and preparation even before they moved in. Firstly, those who knew the children and had worked with them thoroughly assessed their needs. Contact was made with a wide range of professionals, such as occupational therapists, medics and speech therapists.

The family also found out what kind of practical support was available to them. For example, the area they lived in provided a Portage scheme, teaching skills to disabled children.

In terms of aids and adaptations, they had to get funding for a specialist bed for one of the children. Also, as they were suddenly a family of six, they had to arrange with the local authority a one-off payment for a minibus.

Outside the home, the family looked for appropriate schools, and considered whether the children would be best off in mainstream or specialist educational provision. Arrangements for respite care were also put in place.

#### **Dealing with your child's feelings**

The fact that a child has come into care means their first experiences have usually been difficult ones. Every loss in their life adds more trauma and can have an effect on their development, and should not be glossed over. You have to help children to feel safe in your home and family, otherwise they can't begin to attach.

Your child, for example, may not really understand that moving in with you is a permanent move. Give the child permission to talk about, or give expression to, their feelings. I understand that this can be painful for carers, as they want those first few weeks to be a really happy time, a time of celebration. Try not to feel threatened by your child's past, and think about what their behaviour is *saying* to you, rather than what it is *doing* to you.

Learn to be incredibly explicit and convey how things are done in your home, but be aware of your child's existing routines, which you can find out from their foster carers. Children often need structure to their day, and you might want to print a diary and stick it on the fridge for



**In those first few weeks you might want to prepare your child for meeting their new extended family later on**

them to see what you're all doing each day, especially at weekends. Perhaps the night before can be spent discussing what you could do, and adding it to the diary together.

#### **Staying in touch with foster carers**

Some children talk incessantly about their previous carers at first, which can be very frustrating for new parents. However, it can be a tremendous source of support for adoptive parents to have a good relationship with their child's previous foster carers, and I've known that work very positively. Your child may also become very attached to the children in their carers' family, and regard them as siblings. He or she may therefore benefit from having some contact with their foster family during those first few weeks, either by phone, email or post.

#### **Getting support from your social worker**

Personally, I'm always available for a newly adoptive family. I would certainly be visiting quite a bit in those first few weeks. But I also have to remember what I represent for some children: a social worker is somebody who moves you. Children may be anxious about my visits and it can be unsettling for them: I therefore have to let people get on with their lives as a family, but I let them know I'm there if necessary, and encourage them to call me if they want to discuss anything at all. It's about getting the balance right.

#### **As told to Sophie Offord.**

**Bridget and Robin and Nicky Ball, an adoptive family she has worked with, have put together a CD Rom, *Bridget's taking a long time*, an interactive story dealing with children in an adoptive family. She has also filmed and directed, and produced with Robin Ball and BB2 Media, a DVD which addresses similar issues, called *Just a member of the family*. To order copies, visit [www.baaf.org.uk](http://www.baaf.org.uk).**



**Bridget says a 'family book' can help the child begin to feel part of their new family**

## What support can I expect when I am adopting?

It's important that you talk to your social worker and your child's social worker before the move about help and support and special services which may be necessary. If you are adopting in England and Wales, you should have a written Adoption Placement Report, discussed and agreed with you, covering support in place as well as arrangements for contact with birth family and exercise of parental responsibility.

If appropriate, referrals should already have been made for specialist therapy or educational or health services which your child may need. Both social workers will offer you all the help

they can during the settling-in period. They're required to visit at regular intervals and review how things are going. Your child's local authority has, under a new 'three-year rule', responsibility for support. After three years, the local authority you are resident in will pick up responsibility for all support except financial aid.

Before the child moves in, you should be clear about any practical and financial support which can be given. Many local authorities pay a settling-in grant, especially if you are adopting older children, which could be several hundred

pounds, to cover your initial outlay on equipment such as beds and car seats. If you are adopting a group of siblings, it may be possible for them to pay towards a larger car and for equipment such as a washing machine, for example. Regular financial support may be available for certain children, a group of brothers and sisters, for example, or a child with disabilities, or serious behavioural difficulties. This regular financial support is means-tested but you should enquire about this if you think you need help at any stage.