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About Adoption

A Children's Views Report

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Children's Rights Director

November 2006

www.rights4me.org

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All Children's Views Reports can be found on our website:

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About the Children's Rights Director

My legal duties as Children's Rights Director for England are set out in the Commission for Social Care Inspection (Children's Rights Director) Regulations 2004. One of my main jobs, with my team in the Office of the Children's Rights Director, is to ask children and young people for their views about how they are looked after when they are living away from home, their views about being adopted, and their views about being helped by local councils' social care services.



I then tell the Government, as well as the Commission for Social Care Inspection (which does inspections to check on how children and young people are being looked after and supported) what those children and young people think, and about any concerns they have about the care or support they are getting. "Children's Views" reports of what children and young people have told me are published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my Children's Views reports on our children's rights website www.rights4me.org.

The children and young people I ask for their views are those living away from home in England (in children's homes, boarding schools, residential special schools, residential further education colleges, foster care, or residential family centres), children with experience of being adopted, those who are getting help of any sort from the children's social care services of their local council, and care leavers.

About this report

Being adopted is a very big step for many children every year. This report is to find out what adopted children themselves think about adoption – about the way they got adopted, about being an adopted person and whether that makes a difference at home or at school, and about what might be special about being adopted. This is a report of what children said. We have not added any of our own views as adults, we have not added our own comments, and we have not left out things that children said that we might disagree with.

We found out what children and young people think about adoption by sending out a set of “question cards” with questions about adoption to answer on them. Some of the questions were ones to choose and tick an answer, others had a space to write views, ideas or reasons for things. This was therefore a survey, but done in a way that we hoped children and young people would find OK to fill in.

We sent the question cards out to adoptive parents, who could therefore check that they felt they were OK for their children or the young people to fill in. This was so that we didn't end up asking children questions at a time or about things that would be likely to upset them. A few parents said they didn't want to pass on the question cards to their adopted children, which was fine. Some parents helped very young children to put their views on the cards – and often told us they had written what the child said, not what they thought as parents, as we had asked them to do. A few adoptive parents wanted us to know what they thought too, separately from what their children wanted to tell us, and we have put the main points parents wrote to us in the annex at the end of this report.

We have added together the views written to us from the children and young people, but we have not identified who said what. Where someone wrote something we thought summed up well what many others said, or was a good example of something others had written about, we have put their words in the report as a “quote”.

We have sent this report to Government Ministers and officials responsible for adoption and other children's services, to other key people in Parliament, to the Commission for Social Care Inspection, to each of the UK Children's Commissioners, to adoption organisations, and to all children's social care authorities in England.

This report on children's views is being published together with another report about adoption, written by the Commission for Social Care Inspection after a special study they did with adults and professionals. This is the report of what the children themselves think, to go along with that important study.

Thank you to all the children and young people who filled in their question cards and sent them back to us. We know that sometimes it was difficult to write and think about some of the feelings they have told us about, and we are especially grateful for the difficult things many of them have shared so that we can pass them on to the people who make decisions about how adoption should work in the future.

Thank you also to the staff of different councils and adoption agencies who helped us send out our questions cards, and to the parents who checked the cards and passed them on to their adopted children, those who helped them to fill them in if they needed help, and those who decided it was best for their child not to fill in questions just now.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roger My". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial 'R' and a long, sweeping tail.

The children who responded to the survey

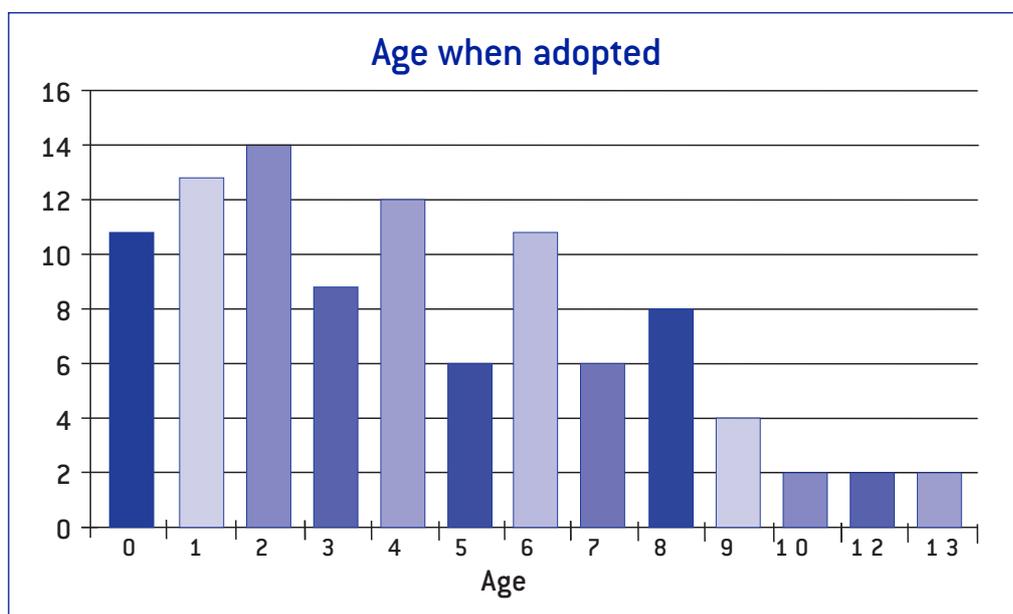
The average age of the 208 children and young people who sent us back their question cards was 11. The youngest child to send us their views was aged 6, with help from an adult in filling in their cards, and the oldest was a young person of 22. A quarter of the children were under 10, and another quarter were over 14. Nearly two thirds (63%) of the cards came back from girls, a third from boys.

We asked the children about their ethnic background, and 87% of those sending their cards back told us they were white, 8% said they had a mixed race background, and 3% that they were Asian.

Ten percent of those sending their cards back said they had a disability or learning difficulties; most of these people told us they had learning difficulties (6% of all the children who sent cards back to us).

When the children were adopted

The **average age at which the children had been adopted was 4**. Just over one in ten (11%) had been adopted when less than one year old. Nearly a quarter had been adopted before they were 2 years old, a half up to the age of 4, and a quarter had been adopted when they were aged 7 or older. **Only 6% of children had been adopted after they reached “double figures” in age** at 10 or older, and the oldest age for adoption amongst those who sent us cards was 13. The graph shows the spread of ages at which the children were adopted.



We also wanted to know, for the children and young people who sent us their views about adoption and being an adopted person, how long it was since they had been adopted. **The average time since being adopted was 7 years.** Only 2 children had been adopted less than a year ago. A quarter had been adopted fewer than 5 years ago, and a quarter had been adopted 10 or more years ago. Two young people had been adopted 17 years ago.

The important message here is that our report is about the views of children and young people now, about when they were being adopted and about their experience now of being an adopted young person. It is not a report about children's experience of being adopted only over the past couple of years. For many people, their experience of the process of being adopted was some years in the past, and of course some of the processes have changed over the years.

How it feels getting adopted

On one of our cards, we asked the children how it had felt getting adopted and going through the process they had gone through at the time. Of course, for some, this was when they were very young indeed, so the views here are from those who were old enough at the time to be able to remember and tell us what it was like.

We asked what children thought had been the best, and the worst, things about the way they had got adopted. Here are all the best things that we were told by more than two children or young people, in order with the most frequent at the top. The percentage of children saying each one is in brackets:

Best things about getting adopted

- Joining a new or real family (42)
- First being picked up by your adoptive parents (22)
- The judge (11)
- Being able to stay with brothers or sisters (9)
- Knowing that people care about you (6)
- Adoption was quick and smooth (6)
- Being told what was happening (6)
- The social worker (4)
- Realising you are going to live somewhere for ever (4)
- Liking your new adoptive parents (4)

Clearly, **the biggest “best thing” about getting adopted is joining your new family and feeling good about them:** *“well chosen parents”, I had a mum and dad who could support me”. “I like my mum and dad”.* One person told us how they felt their new family would be able to look after them well and give them a good future; *“that I was to get a good future”.*

What the judge was like was important for many children: *“Judge made day special and fun”.*

We checked whether what the children thought was the best thing about being adopted was different depending on how old they were when they were adopted. We found that joining a new family and being picked up by your adoptive parents were in the top three best things for each age group we looked at, but that what the judge was like became one of the top three best things for children who were aged over 6 when they got adopted. One in five of these children told us that the judge was a best thing about the way they had been adopted.

Whether or not you could be adopted with your own brothers and sisters was important for many children too. One told us how they had been separated, but then *“two years later they adopted my birth brother”.*

Here are the things people told us had been the worst things about getting adopted, again we have listed all those that came to us from more than 2 children:

Worst things about getting adopted

Leaving your old family (26)

It took too long / too much waiting (20)

Not knowing enough about the family (11)

The social worker (7)

Not having any say in what was happening (6)

How I felt about meeting my new family and getting adopted (6)

Moving (6)

Not feeling things were stable (5)

Being separated from brothers or sisters (5)

The court (5)

Being fostered before getting adopted (4)

Missing my own family (3)

13% of children said there was no “worst thing” at all about how they had been adopted.

The two main worst things for children about the way they had been adopted were having to leave your old family, and the whole adoption process taking too long.

One child summed up how they had felt leaving their birth family; *“saying goodbye to our old mum and dad, especially to our dog ... and cat”*. Someone else said *“my mum had 8 children and they were all separated gradually.”* Another said how hard it had been *“finding out my mum gave me up”*.

Leaving your birth family was in the top three worst things about getting adopted, whatever age children had been when they were adopted. The adoption process taking too long was more important the older you were when you were adopted. It was the top worst thing for those who were aged over 6 when they were adopted. 41% of those who were adopted when they were over 6 told us that the waiting was the worst thing about getting adopted.

Many wrote about their experiences of adoption being too slow for them: *“it went on forever and forever”*. For some, important people kept leaving before the adoption was through: *“social workers kept moving on”*. For some, they had not been in enough contact with their new family while all the processes went on: *“I hardly saw my new mum and dad between the meeting and moving in”*. This could mean you *“don’t really know where you are going”*.

Very many children wrote about their own worries when first adopted. *“My birth mother got a bit cross when I was adopted”*; *“I fight with my brothers and sisters”*; *“don’t really know where you are going”*; *“scared that horrid birthparents would come after you”*.

Some told us that **it had been difficult for them to be fostered and then adopted:** *“in foster care too long”*, and another had been worried that their adoptive parents were really foster carers; *“the family were foster carers”*.

A few children also wrote to us about how **things had gone badly wrong** for them. One told us they had been *“living with nasty foster carers who hurt me”*, another that their *“first adoption failed”*, and another that they had had a bad experience *“having an adoptive place which didn’t work and then having to find another new family”*. Some did not get on with the other children in their new family: *“I fight with my brothers and sisters”*, *“being picked on by foster carer’s own children”*. We heard that **some children were worried that they were responsible for trying to make their adoptive placements work out:** *“I felt that if anything went wrong it would be my fault”*.

“I felt that if anything went wrong it would be my fault”

Making getting adopted better

We asked children to tell us how they thought adoption could be made better in the future than they had experienced in the past. We were given 112 ideas for improving adoption. Here are the top ten most frequent ideas (the most frequent first):

Children's top ten ideas for improving adoption

1. Make it quicker
2. Involve and support the child more
3. Keep the child in touch with what is happening – in their birth family as well as in the adoption itself
4. Give more information about adoption
5. Don't change social workers in the middle of being adopted
6. Don't separate brothers and sisters
7. Go to only one foster home before getting adopted
8. Make the process more enjoyable and fun
9. Have more trial days with the new family
10. Let children themselves make the final decision on their new parents

Clearly, **it is important to children going through adoption that the whole process is as quick as it can be, once decided, and that the child should be kept as closely involved as possible.** This means both in making decisions and in having up to date information about what is happening.

"I think it was good to be quickly adopted. Sometimes it could take months for people to get adopted"

Some children wrote to us very strongly about how slow they thought things had been when they got adopted: *"get the paperwork done quicker than three years"*. Some wrote about how they were pleased that things had happened quickly for them: *"I think it was good to be quickly adopted. Sometimes it could take months for people to get adopted"*. **Timing though is not just going faster or slower – some things, like paperwork, need to be done faster, but other things may need to go slower for the child's sake:** *"A bit faster, meet family quicker, see your new family sooner, more time to say goodbye to everyone."*

Involving the child more means *"ask them what they want"*. It also means **giving out information** about what happens when you get adopted, as well as what is happening for you at every stage: *"they could write out simplified processes so that the child understands exactly what is going through"*.

Some thought that **adoptive parents should be told more about any problems or needs the child has**, as well as the child being given more information about their new family: *“parents should know of problems the child has”*.

Some young people told us there should be **more support like counselling for children**. This was often needed before being adopted, when adoption was being thought about. Then some needed it after being adopted: *“more help afterwards like counselling and therapy”*. In some cases, **meeting up with others who were going to be adopted** would help: *“it would be good if all children waiting to be adopted could meet each other and talk about things and comfort each other.”*

Many told us how important it is to try **to keep the same social worker** throughout a person’s adoption process. *“A social worker should stay with you and not keep on changing. I got confused about what was happening”*.

There is an important point about not having lots of different fostering placements before you finally moved to the family that was going to adopt you: *“need to know why you keep getting moved around before adoption”*.

Some children, when answering this question, wanted us to report that they had been **more than happy with their adoption process** and how things were handled for them: *“I had no problems with it”, “there is nothing to be changed – it all went good for me”*.

“It would be good if all children waiting to be adopted could meet each other and talk about things and comfort each other”



Being an adopted person

We wanted to know what children and young people who had been adopted thought were the best, and the worst, things about being an adopted person. We asked this on one of our question cards, and we were sent 170 best things, and 151 worst things, about being an adopted person.

Here are all the best things about being an adopted person that were sent to us by more than two people (with the percentages of those sending cards in to us in brackets):

Best things about being an adopted person

- Being part of a family (46)
- Having new things to do (21)
- Being loved / cared for (17)
- Feeling special (13)
- Having great adoptive parents (10)
- Feeling safe (10)
- Being different (8)
- Being someone your family chose (7)
- Having two families (7)
- Having fun (5)
- Making friends (5)

Like anything, being adopted can have its downside too. Here are all the worst things about being an adopted person that we were sent by more than two people:

***"Nothing different
to a normal
person"***

Worst things about being an adopted person

- Not having contact with birth family (30)
- Being teased or bullied (13)
- Losing contact with birth brothers or sisters (11)
- Being different (9)
- Feeling left out (7)
- Knowing you are adopted (7)
- Other people talking about you being adopted (7)
- Complex emotions about it (6)
- Not knowing your heritage (6)
- Losing old friends (5)
- Being asked questions about being adopted (4)
- Feeling frightened (3)
- Not being believed when you say you are adopted (3)

18% of children and young people said there was no worst thing for them about being an adopted person.

As you might expect, both the best and worst things about being an adopted person are to do with families. **The best of adoption is being part of a family you get on with and where you are loved and cared for.** But the other side of this is that for many, **being out of touch with your birth family – both your parents and your brothers and sisters, can be the worst side of it.**

Being part of a family was the top best thing about being adopted for all age groups. Young people who were now over 14 put getting love and attention from their parents as the next best thing, with 1 in 5 (21%) of over 14s telling us this.

Being out of touch with your birth family was the worst thing about being adopted for all ages. The next worst thing was different depending on your age now. **For those aged 11 to 13, being bullied or teased about being adopted was the next worst thing, while for those aged 14 and over now, feeling different or left out was the next worst thing.**

Many children wrote to tell us how things felt for them. On the good side, people told us how good it felt to be adopted and in their present family: *“nothing different to a*

normal person”, “there is nothing bad about being an adopted person”, “wish I had been born to mum”. On the bad side, some people wrote about how they felt about missing their birth family: “I sometimes miss my birth mum and dad”, “remembering things”, “you think about your birth family and wonder about what they did in the past”. We heard how a few found that **their feelings about their birth family changed over time**: “start hating your first parents”. Some told us they just wanted to know more about their birth family: “I always want to know more about my birth family”. Others told us about missing old friends: “I never see my old friends and I will never see them”.

“I have come to my family already hurt”

We heard about how **being an adopted person could be confusing and emotional**: “having my name changed”, “I sometimes don’t want to be adopted”, “it was frightening and scary coming to a new house”, “knowing that you don’t belong biologically to anyone fully”, “you question your own identity”, “you wonder where you came from”. One told us how they didn’t know much about their own past, or what they had looked like when younger: “I don’t have any baby photos of myself”.

Some children and young people told us how they felt if they did not get on as well as they wanted to with their adoptive family: “my sister gets more attention than me”, “sometimes I can feel very alone and unsupported”. You **could feel very guilty that things going wrong might be all your own fault**: “sometimes you feel out of tune with your adoptive family and think it’s your fault”. This could happen even if “I have come to my family already hurt”.

It is very worrying that **13% of the children and young people told us that being bullied or teased about it was the worst thing about being adopted. Being teased or bullied about being adopted was specially a problem for those aged 11 to 13**, where just under a quarter (23%) of the children told us it was a worst thing about being an adopted person. Only one person told us that adoption had stopped bullying that had been happening before that. This is something about being an adopted person that needs to be thought more about.

It is also clear from some that **feeling different, or special, as an adopted person can be either a good or bad thing**; “get treated differently”. About the same number of people said that feeling different was good, as those who said that feeling different was a worst thing for them. One person simply told us “sometimes I feel different coz I’m not with my real mum and dad”.

How other people react and ask you questions can be important, and can also be a problem sometimes. As one put it, it is hard “being told about being adopted and having to explain it to others.” “Some people don’t know what it means so they ask you a lot of questions”. Some adopted people told us they **tried to keep it a secret** that they had been adopted, “not having the confidence to tell my friends”. One wrote to us about “keeping the secret”.

It is important to note though that so many children and young people wanted us to report that for them, there is **no worst thing at all about being an adopted person**. For them, it has worked right. So we are reporting that here for them.

Getting information

We have already heard how important it is that children being adopted are **told plenty of information – about their birth families, about their adoptive families, about what happens when you are being adopted, and about what is happening at each stage** of their own adoption.

We asked a series of questions on our question cards about these issues. The first question was about getting a Children's Guide when children are adopted. Of course, that is what should happen now, and many of our young people had been adopted some years ago, so we would not expect all to have received a Children's Guide.

From those who returned their question cards to us, fewer than one in ten (8%) had been given a **Children's Guide** at the time they were adopted. Most of these, as we would expect, were children who were aged 7 or older when they were adopted. The Guides were good, though. **Three quarters of the people who had been given one said that it had told them either everything, or most things, they had wanted to know about what happens** when you get adopted. Only one person said it had told them "*nothing much*". It looks as if people writing guides about adoption are putting the right sort of information in.



To help people producing guides now, or discussing adoption with children nowadays, we also asked children and young people what sorts of things they had wanted to know about when they were being adopted. Nearly a quarter of the people who sent their cards in thought they were too young at the time, but the others gave us their list of what they had wanted to know. Here are the top ten most frequent things children being adopted wanted to know about at the time:

The top ten things children wanted to know when they were being adopted

1. about the process
2. when you would be allowed to see your birth family
3. what your adoptive parents are like
4. why you have to be adopted
5. what happens if your adoption goes wrong / does it have to be for ever?
6. how long will it take to be adopted?
7. where are you going to live
8. what will being adopted feel like
9. will you be properly part of a family?
10. will you be safe?

11% of children told us there was nothing they wanted to know that they didn't already know when they were being adopted

We heard that there were two things that many children simply didn't know, or didn't understand. The first of these was **what being adopted actually meant** for you. *"Just what adoption actually meant as at the time I didn't really understand". "Would it feel the same way as having your birth mum and dad".* There were also some detailed questions people had wondered about but not been given answers to: *"could you be adopted by someone from another country?", "does your name change?"* "The second thing people didn't know was what **would actually happen to you**: *"how does the adoption work?", "the process they and the carers go through and how it all works", "also all the police checks and things before a person can be adopted".*

"Would it feel the same way as having your birth mum and dad"

Children told us that it was important that they knew exactly **how much say they were going to have** in things: *“do we get a say in everything?”*. There were also some big things that you didn’t know, but which were very much on your mind: *“I wanted to know who I was going to live with”,* and *“that the family they are going to is really going to love them”*. If you had **brothers and sisters** in your birth family, it was important to know what would happen to them as well as you: *“where was my brother and would my sister leave me?”*

While they were being adopted, we know from children that they want to **be told what is happening and how things are going**. On our question cards, we asked whether children thought they had been told enough about how things were going. Again, this question was for those who had been old enough at the time to want to be told how things were going. **45% of the children and young people who thought they had been old enough, wrote that they had been told enough about how things were going.** 38% wrote that they weren’t really told anything about how things were going. The other 17% were told some things, but wanted to be told more. The older they were when they were adopted, the more they felt they had been told about what was happening.

“Where was my brother and would my sister leave me?”

Among the things children said they had wanted to know, it is again important to remember that **just over one in ten children and young people told us there was nothing more they had wanted to know**. One told us how a story about someone being adopted had helped them understand things, and another that a life story book about their life before being adopted had given them lots of information for after they had been adopted. One described how their adoptive parents were good at telling them whatever they wanted to know: *“mum and dad are very open with me – if we don’t know, we ask!”*.

Meeting up with others

We have already heard how some children thought it would have helped them to meet up with others who were going through adoption at the same time they were. On one of our question cards, we asked about the idea of meeting up with other children and young people – while you were being adopted, and afterwards.

Around a quarter of the children **(26%) said that while they were going through their adoption, they had met up with other children who were going through adoption at the same time**. The other three quarters hadn’t. Most of the people who had met others going through adoption (85% of them) told us that they had found this helpful. Half of the people who had met others being adopted said the most helpful thing about it was **knowing that you are not the only person in the situation** – you were not alone, and you could compare how things were going with

other people. *“Because I could talk to others about how they felt”, “because I got told information about adoption”*. Some people found that they **made friends** with others in the same situation: *“I made loads of friends and found out how it felt to be somewhere for a long time”, “it was good to have an adopted friend”*. One person summed it up like this *“meetings with other adoptive children helped me a lot because you knew that there is always someone you can talk to about your experiences of being adopted”*.

Of the children who hadn't met up with others being adopted, almost half (48%) told us that they would have liked to. When we asked them why they thought this would have helped them, they thought it would have given them just the sort of help the people who had met up with others had told us they got out of it. This was not feeling alone, talking with others about how they feel, and finding things out about adoption. *“I thought I was the only person getting adopted in the world”, “because you can understand each other”, “we would have made friends and comforted each other”*.

Meeting up with other people being adopted isn't for everyone though. 15% of the people who had met others being adopted told us it hadn't helped them: *“just meeting kids that have been adopted doesn't do anything”*. And almost half **(46%) of the children who hadn't met up with others told us they wouldn't have wanted to.** Quite apart from this, of course, you have to be old enough to find this sort of meeting helpful anyway. Here are some of the reasons people gave for why they didn't think the idea of meeting others being adopted would have helped them: *“because each case is different. If I began comparing myself, everything would become more complicated”, “I don't need other people's experiences to get me through”, “might make you feel scared by what they say”*.

We were also interested to know if people had met up with others who had been adopted after their own adoption was completed, and whether this was a good idea or not. Again, we asked questions about this on our question cards.

Nearly three quarters of the children and young people (72%) told us they had met up with other people who had been adopted, after their own adoption. This could be helpful to know that others are going through the same experiences as adopted people that you are, and to be able to **talk to others about your experiences.** It could also make **you feel you belong.** Being able to **talk to others who understand** is important: *“because you can speak with them and they know how you feel because they have been through the same things as you”, “you get to talk to people and they would talk to you and not judge you. They would just understand”, “I don't feel like I'm the odd one out”*.

One thing that we heard many adopted children and young people usually find it hard to talk about, but can talk about freely with other people who have been adopted, is **how they feel about their birth families.** Two quotes sum this up well: *“we can imagine and wonder together about our birth families”, “they really help you when*

you're down missing your family and you can say what you feel with someone who really understands".

We found out that the younger the children were now, the more likely they were to have met up with other children who had been adopted. Over 8 out of 10 of those who were now aged under 11 had met up with other adopted children, 7 out of 10 of those aged 11 to 13 had met up with others, and 6 out of ten of those now aged 14 and over had done this.

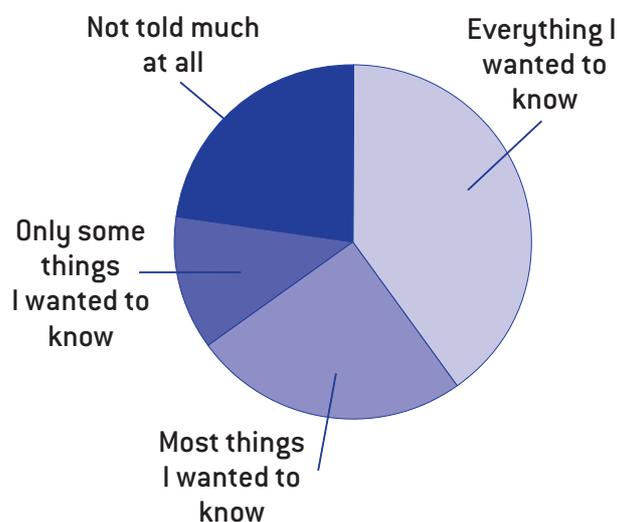
Again though, nearly half **(45%) those who answered this question on our cards told us that they wouldn't want to meet up with other adopted people now**. This was close to the almost half who said they would like to do this (47%). Again, meeting up is not for everyone, and needs to be a choice. *"I am fine on my own", "I am already settled and have forgotten about it"*. One young person answered the question about whether it would be helpful to meet other adopted people by writing *"help me do what?"*

"We can imagine and wonder together about our birth families"

Finding out about your new family

Being given **good information about their new adoptive family** was one of the things children had told us was very important about getting adopted. We asked whether children had been told enough about their adoptive families while they were being adopted, if of course they were old enough. **Two thirds told us that they had been told either everything, or most things, that they had wanted to know**. Nearly a quarter said they hadn't been told much about them at all. The pie chart shows how this question was answered.

How much children were told about their adoptive families



We asked through our question cards what children and young people thought that everyone able to understand should be told about their new adoptive family before they moved in. Here are the top ten most frequent things children want to be told:

The top ten things children want to be told about their adoptive families

1. what sort of people they are
2. the number of children and young people in the family
3. where they live
4. their personality and beliefs
5. reassurance that they want you and are friendly towards children
6. their family background
7. why they want to adopt you
8. if they have any pets
9. have a story book or DVD about the family
10. if they will have contact with my birth family

This is an important list for people working with children being adopted to take notice of and use when keeping children informed. Some examples of what children told us about this are: *“personal details – names, ages, where they live, jobs etc.”*, *“way of life”*, *“what is their house like?”*, *“what is their relationship like”*, *“what they like doing”*.

As well as knowing these things about the family, many wrote on our question cards that it is **important to be reassured not just that your adoptive family do want you and are friendly towards children, but also that they really will look after you properly**, and that they are the right family for you to live with. *“Are they nice?”*, *“they are looking forward to having me”*, *“that I was staying for ever if I wanted”*.

“That I was staying for ever if I wanted”

We asked whether there was anything particular that children had not been told, but had found out for themselves, that they had wished they had been told before they moved in to their new adoptive home. As you would expect from the pie chart, two thirds (65%) said there was nothing at all that they wished they had been told beforehand. From those that would have wanted to know more, we heard of four main sorts of information they would have liked. These were **what their adoptive parents’ life was like, the**

personalities of their adoptive parents, what other relations the adoptive parents had who you would be meeting, and (though this was something you really had to find out for yourself) how kind or nice they would be to you. *"I found out that they were friendly", "my mum is bossier than thought!", "that they had animals"*.

Getting to know the family

Children were very clear to us that **arriving and first settling in to their new family is a vital and scary time**. We asked questions about how children thought they should be helped to settle in.

There were five main ways of getting to know their adoptive families that children thought worked well. They are:

Best ways of getting to know your adoptive family

1. Visiting and staying a few days before moving in
2. Going on days out with the family
3. Spending time talking with your future adoptive parents
4. Being given a video or book about the family
5. Having fun and playing games with the family

One adopted person summed up how visiting could build up to eventually moving in:

"visits, gradually building up to moving in with them." **Visits are clearly important in settling in later on:** *"stay with them every week", "stay over one night and see how they like it"*. So are **spending time together and talking;** *"spend more time getting to know them", "spend time talking"*. It is important to **get to know everyone in the family** you might join; *"spend time with each family member one to one"*. The idea of **doing activities together** came from many children and young people as a way of getting to know the family; *"fun days out where they can interact", "go out and have an adventure"*. This also lets the child and their future family *"meet on neutral territory"*.

"Visits, gradually building up to moving in with them"

We also asked what children wanted their new adoptive families to do once they had moved in, to help them settle in the family from the start. Here were the top ten ways for families to help their newly adopted child settle in:

Top ten ways for families to help their newly adopted child settle in

- 1 Spend time with the child
- 2 Love and care for them
- 3 Make them feel welcome and comfortable
- 4 Give them treats
- 5 Give them reassurance and support
- 6 Decorate their room with them
- 7 Show them around everywhere they need to know
- 8 Provide for the child's needs
- 9 Understand the child's feelings
- 10 Give them their personal space

Many children wrote their examples of how these things should work. It was important to *“do stuff together”, “give them things they like”, and “give them lots of love”*. One idea was to give the child a **welcome to the family present**; *“give you a present when you arrive”*. It is important to just be together to grow together; *“have quality time together”, go on holiday with them”, “telling stories before bed”, play with them”, and “always be there to talk to”*. In short, simply *“include them”*.

But we heard of two things that a family has to get in balance for the child they have just adopted. One is **not forgetting that the adopted child has a past, may have their own other family links, and may find things difficult at first**; *“respect that they have a life and people who are special to them”, “realise that it’s not easy”, and “give them space”*. The other though is to **treat them as much as possible like everyone else in the family**; *“help them fit in – treat them the same”, “make them feel part of the family and not like a visitor”*. Families have to *“spend time together as a family”* and *“don’t smother the child”*.

“Respect they have a life and people who are special to them”

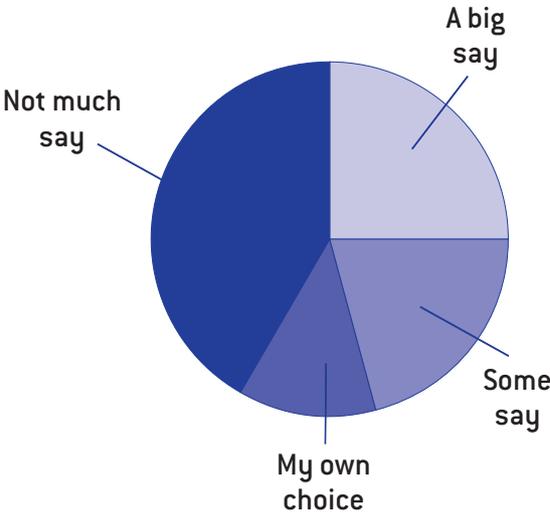
Choosing families

Choosing the right family for a child is one of the biggest decisions ever made for an adopted child. We asked on our question cards whether children had been told the reasons why their particular adoptive family had been chosen for them. 178 children gave us their answer to this: **just under half (46%) had been told the reasons for choosing their adoptive family, and just over half (53%) hadn't been told the reasons.** The older you were when you were adopted, the more likely you were to have been told the reasons.

We asked how much choice the child had had themselves in choosing the family they were now adopted by. **Two thirds of the children told us they were too small at the time to have any choice. 68 children did however tell us how much choice they had. A quarter told us that they had been able to make the final choice of family themselves. Another third said that they had some say in the final choice of family.** Just under half (43%) said that they didn't really have much say in it. Of course, how much say you had depended a lot on how old you were at the time. Well over a third (37%) of those who were adopted when they were over 7 told us they had a big say in choosing the family who adopted them.

The pie chart shows how much say these 68 children told us they'd had:

How much say 68 children had in choosing their adoptive families



As well as how much say children had in choosing their adoptive family, we asked whether they felt they could have disagreed with the choice being made if they had wanted to. Two thirds said they couldn't have disagreed, often of course because they were too young. **A third (32%) of all the children though said that they could have disagreed** – they were old enough, and felt that they could have done if they had wanted to.

The people who choose families for children need to get the decisions right first time as often as possible. We asked the children what they thought are the most important things that social workers should look for when choosing a family for a child. Here are the top ten things children want social workers to look for in a possible adoptive family:

The top ten things social workers should look for in choosing a family to adopt a child

- 1 That they are kind and caring
- 2 That the child is likely to get on with them and be happy
- 3 That they like children and really do want another one
- 4 That they have the same background as the child they are adopting
- 5 That they will be able to look after the child properly
- 6 That they have things in common with the child
- 7 That they understand the child's needs
- 8 That their police check is OK
- 9 That they live in the right surroundings for the child
- 10 That they will go on loving the child for ever

These are the things children want social workers to be sure about before they place a child to be adopted by a family. Many children gave us quotes about these things, like *"caring, loving, understanding"*, *"that I am going to be loved and accepted"*, *"that they will love me and keep me safe"*, *"they would make you happy"*. Very many used the word **"love" as an important thing that had to be there to make it all work.**

Many told us how important it is that **the family and the child must match each other**; *"make sure it is a good match"*, *"look for things in common"*. There needs to be a good match between *"the personality of the child"* and *"the personality of the family"*. Sometimes this means having the same background – *"culture"*, *"don't disagree on anything eg religion"*, *same race"*, *"language"*.

Checking the family is not dangerous is important, making sure there is *"no previous abuse to children"*.

One younger child said that things have to be checked properly to make sure they are *"a family that aren't nasty people like robbers"*.

"Look for things in common"

There are some things that children want in any family that is going to adopt them; ***“that they are a happy family”*** and social workers have checked ***“how much time they will spend with the child”***. It is also always important, whatever the family is like, to check ***“if the child likes them”***.

Some children had their own particular things that they believe are important in choosing the right family. Examples were *“looks”*, *“have they got any pets”*, worries about *“drugs and alcohol”* and even *“the way they smell”*. **Those choosing families for children need to check what special things are important like this for each child** they are finding a family for.

Since many children said it was important to look for families that were like the child, it is important to write here what the children thought about being from a different background than their adoptive parents. We had asked on our cards whether the children’s families were from a different race to the child, had a different religion, or spoke a different language.

None of the children wrote that they had any problems because they were of a different race, religion or language than their adoptive parents. *“Don’t mind but feel different”*. *“Feel privileged.”* *“Feel normal about it”*.

“If the child likes them”



We found out that fewer than one in ten children **(8%) had adoptive parents from a different race to their own**. Some of these children told us the difference was the country they came from, but not their skin colour. Only one child told us their adoptive parents usually spoke a different language to theirs.

Almost one in ten **(9%) of the children told us their adoptive families had a different religion to theirs**. Some of these children told us the difference was not so much a difference between religions, but that they did not themselves keep to a religion but their adoptive parents did. Sometimes, once they were adopted, children took on the faith and worship of their adoptive parents; *“when I was adopted I didn’t have a religion but my new family are Salvationist. I now go to the Salvation Army.”*

Checking children are happy

Very many children told us how important it is that they are happy in their adoptive family. They had told us how important it is that social workers and others who find families to adopt children get that right, and what they thought social workers should look for. We also asked exactly how social workers should then check that children and young people are happy in their new families while the adoption is going through. There were 5 clear main ways for doing this:

How social workers should check children are happy in new families

- 1 Ask the child – but listen to the answers
- 2 Make visits to see the child
- 3 Speak to both the parents and the child – both alone, and together
- 4 Spend time talking to the child away from the family home
- 5 Check how the child is fitting in both at home and at school

These five ideas are ones we have heard from other children about how people like social workers should check up on things for them. Children have over the years told us that wherever they are, **the most important things are to ask them what they think, listen and take notice of what they say, and talk to them alone and away from the home so that they can talk freely and raise any concerns they may have without family members either with them or nearby.**

Some children simply summed this up in writing things like *“ask them”, “one to one visits”, “they should ask the child”*. Some suggested that there should be more

telephone contact between the social worker and the child; *“ring the child”, “call us”*. A vital point about asking children whether they are happy and being looked after well, or not, is that **the child must feel safe telling the truth**. *“Let them know they can be honest and not worry about telling the truth.”*

Some suggested that social workers should visit but use their observation skills to see if they thought all was well; *“observe how they interact with each other”, “study body language between the adoptive parent and the child”*.

“Let them know they can be honest and not worry about telling the truth”



Information about life before being adopted

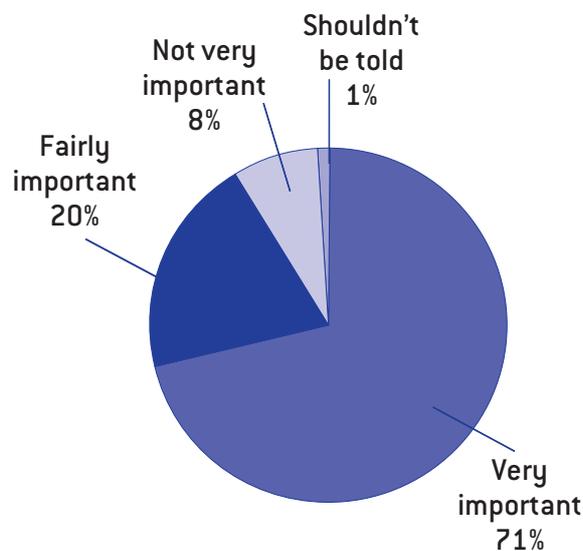
We asked children who had been adopted how much they knew about their life before they were adopted. 197 answered this question on their question cards, and exactly half said they only knew a little about their life before being adopted. Just over a third (38%) said they knew a lot about it. How much you knew depended on how long ago you had been adopted. **Over half (52%) of those who had been adopted in the last 5 years told us they knew a lot about their life before being adopted, but only around a quarter (26%) of those who had been adopted over 10 years ago said they knew a lot.**

We also asked how important it is that children and young people should be told about their lives before they got adopted. Nearly three quarters (71%) thought it was very important. Because this is many more than those who had told us they knew a lot about their lives before they were adopted, this tells us that **a lot of adopted children do think it is important that they should be told more than they have been about their lives before they were adopted.** This doesn't mean all adopted children and young people wanted this though – as always, different people had different views about it.

The pie chart shows how important people thought it is to know about life before adoption:

"It's important to know their history – you can't just wipe away parts of somebody's life"

How important is it to be told about life before being adopted?



There were seven main things that stood out from what the children wrote that they thought adopted children should be told about their past. These, in order of the number of children who told us each one, are in the box below. The top one, why the child couldn't stay with their birth family and so were adopted, was written to us by just over half (51%) of the 169 children who answered this question.

The top things adopted children want to be told about their past

1. Why they couldn't stay with their birth family and so were adopted
2. Details about their birth family
3. Whatever the individual child asks about
4. About their own life before they were adopted
5. Where they were born
6. If they have any brothers or sisters living somewhere else, and why they were split up
7. Whether they can make contact with their birth family

This list is a mixture of very different, but very important things. It includes wanting **information about the child's birth family and any brothers and sisters they may have but do not live with, and – a very different thing – information about their own past lives before they joined their present family - together with wanting to know the reasons for things. Above all, adopted children told us they wanted to know the reason for leaving their birth family and being adopted.** *"If you know what happened you can understand your feelings better". "It's important to know their history – you can't just wipe away parts of somebody's life".*

Some put this very simply – being told about your birth family, even *"what they looked like"*, helps many to know *"who they are"*.

Some children stressed to us that they wanted to know the basics, but not every detail, about their past and their birth family: *"about their family, but not too much detail"*. Others had not been told the truth about some things in the past, and told us it was important that what they are told is *"always the truth"*.

In being told about why they left their birth families to be adopted, some children told us they **needed to know that this hadn't been their fault.** *"Why they were taken away", "why they needed to get adopted", "that it isn't my fault".*

***"Why they
needed to get
adopted"***

One young person summed up what many said about being told about what led to them leaving their birth family and becoming adopted: *“they should be told why they were given up for adoption and told any other information about the family that influenced their decision.”*

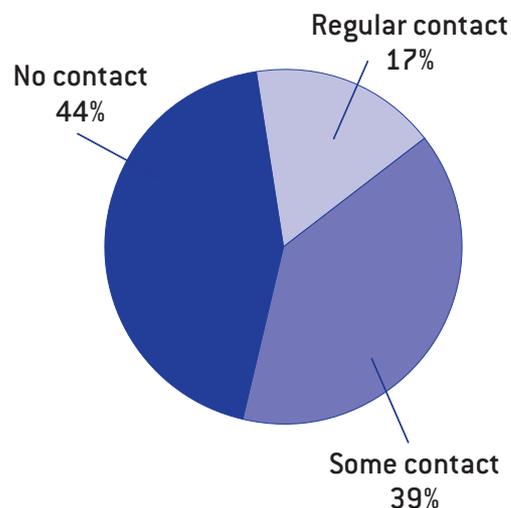
“What happened before I was adopted was nothing I wanted to hear about”

As always, it is important to say that **not all children wanted to know these things**, and a few said to us that they didn’t really want to know anything about their birth families or past life. *“To me it’s not important because what happened before I was adopted was nothing I wanted to hear about”*. It is important that people working with adopted children know about this list, but that they also make sure that they get it right for each individual child, as what is right for many will still not be right for some.

Contact with birth families

Well over half the 201 children (56%) who answered our question about contact with their birth families told us that they do have either some, or regular, contact with their birth families. The pie chart shows their answers:

Contact with their birth family



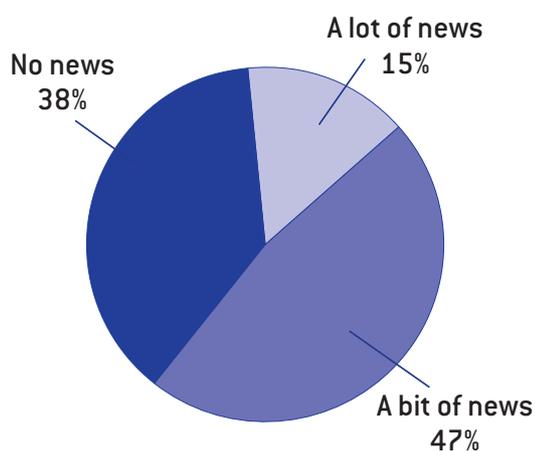
As you might expect, the **children who had been adopted most recently were more likely to have contact with their birth families**, but there were many who had been adopted a long time ago (over 10 years ago) who still had regular contact with their birth families. Almost a quarter (24%) of children and young people who had been adopted over 10 years ago told us they still had regular contact with their birth families.

Two thirds of the children (**64%**) told us they had no say themselves in whether or not they had contact with their birth family. Nearly one in five (19%) had some say in this. 17% told us it was their own choice whether or not they kept in contact with their birth family.

As well as keeping in contact, we asked about whether children received news about things that were happening now in their birth family. Just under two thirds (**62%**) of the children told us they got either a bit of news, or a lot of news, about their birth families. The pie chart shows their answers:

"My mum sends letters but my birth mum never writes back"

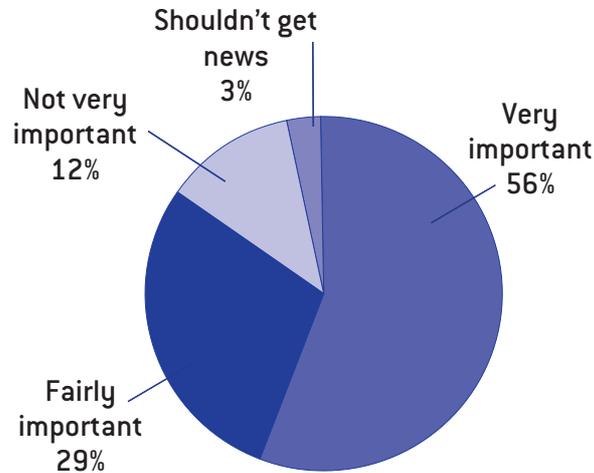
What news children get about their birth families



The usual ways of getting news about their birth families was through letters or emails, by phone, or through a special "letterbox". For some, news came through their social worker or their adoptive parents, and some got news when they met a member of their birth family – sometimes their birth parents, sometimes a brother or sister, or in some cases a grandparent. A few got their news a couple of times a year, written on birthday or christmas cards. A few told us that they sent news about themselves to their birth families, but didn't get news about them in return: *"my mum sends letters but my birth mum never writes back to us"*.

We asked how important it is for an adopted child or young person to be given news now about their birth family. We got 194 replies to this question, and a very high proportion (**85%**) said that it is fairly or very important to be given news. Only five children (3%) thought they shouldn't be given any news at all. Again, the pie chart shows all the answers:

How important is it to get news about your birth family



We also wanted to know what people meant by “news”; what exactly it was that they wanted to know, if they did want to have news. Nearly half (49%) the children and young people answering this question said they wanted **to be kept up to date with what their birth families were doing generally, and how they all were**. *“Just general stuff”*. Over a third (36%) wanted to be told about important events, like someone being born, someone dying, people getting married, or someone falling seriously ill. *“Any important family news the child might have an interest in”*. Some wanted to know all general news, about anything happening or changing. Some were particularly concerned to have **news about their birth brothers or sisters**. A few were very clear that they wanted to know where their birth families were, and if they moved house.

There were lots of very strong and different feelings about getting news about birth families. Some children and young people told us how they **wanted news but found it hard to cope with**; *“lots of news, but I don’t like it”*. **Some were very clear that they didn’t want any news at all**: *“because it will be hard for them and because they have a new life to get on with and a new family”, “I want to get on with my life now. I don’t think about them much I am settled here”*.

Others **wanted to know important things that still worried them, rather than just news**: *“if their birth family still love them”, “do they regret the bad things they did to put into care”*. Some wanted to be **reassured that their birth family hadn’t forgotten them**; *“news that helps the adopted child feel part of the family and that they are still thought of”*. Some wanted to have news to make sure they didn’t forget their birth family; *“I can’t remember them, it’s almost like they died and I feel a loss”*.

“I can’t remember them, it’s almost like they died and I feel a loss”

Some others told us that although they may want to know things happening in their birth families now, it wasn't just about them. You might want to know *"as much as the birth family want to tell"*, but their **birth families would have their own views on whether they wanted the child who had been adopted to have news about them.**

There was a lot of agreement that **each child should have a choice about whether or not they wanted to have any news about their birth family.** *"If the adoptee wishes to know then I think it is their right to know"*. A child **might not want news now, but might want to know news in the future:** *"I am doing a lot of things here now. I will find out news one day may be"*.

The last words about children getting news from their birth family go to the two young people who summed it up for lots of others. One said that news told you *"what is going on with your birth family while you are getting on with your adoptive family"*. The other summed it up by saying *"on the whole it is good to have news. Child must have final say on whether they want the news"*.

"What is going on with your birth family while you are getting on with your adoptive family"



What difference being adopted makes

A final big area we asked about on our question cards was whether being adopted made a difference to the lives of children and young people now. And if it did, in what way. We asked whether being adopted made any difference at home, at school, or in any clubs or activities children went to.

"Some people make me feel special but some make me feel unwanted"

Almost all the 194 children **(94%) who answered this question said that being adopted did not make any difference to how they were treated at home.** For the few that said being adopted made a difference at home, almost all said this was that they were treated kinder, helped to overcome problems they had. *"I feel special", "you get more cuddles I think"*. Only one child said that being adopted made a bad difference to them – that they felt they were not wanted. Nobody else said it made any sort of bad difference at all. The very strong message is that adopted children are not treated differently by their adoptive families at home because they are adopted.

The picture at school was not quite so good, but still good. **85% of the 197 children and young people answering this question said that being adopted made no difference at all at school.** One in eight (12%) told us that being adopted did make a difference for them at school.

There were three main ways we heard that, for a small number of people, being adopted makes a difference at school (or, for some, at college). The first was that **you can be bullied just for being adopted.** 8 children told us that they are being bullied now at school, because they are adopted. This is 4% of everyone who answered the question about what difference being adopted makes at school – which is 1 in 25 adopted children being bullied for being adopted.

What other children say about someone who is adopted can matter a lot. *"Some people make me feel special but some make me feel unwanted". "Sometimes children can be spiteful about my birth family". "Some children are jealous that my mum and dad chose me and we had an adoption party."*

How old you are can make a difference to the things other children and young people do and say; *"I have noticed that young people from secondary school to college have been much more accepting, whereas primary school children are far more ready to stigmatise and segregate someone who is different"*.

The second main difference that being adopted made at school for some children was a good one. **Knowing that they are adopted, their school gives them extra help with school work.** The third main difference was about how adopted children themselves feel – some told us that **being adopted does sometimes make them "feel different"** from other people at school or college. This could happen, for

**"Sometimes
children can be
spiteful"**

example, when teachers were talking about families or things like family trees and inheriting what you are like from your parents.

About half the children **(52%) told us that most of their teachers knew they were adopted**, and just under half (47%) said that most of their teachers didn't know.

Hardly anyone told us that being adopted makes any difference at all at clubs or local activities they go to.

97% of the 199 people who answered this question for us said that it made no difference at all. Most of the very few who said it did make a difference said it meant people being kinder to them.

We found that many adopted children and young people keep it a secret that they are adopted. Over a third **(37%) said they always tried to keep it a secret. Over half (57%) said they did not keep it a secret.** Three quarters (76%) told us that most of their friends know they are adopted. One in five (20%) had kept it a secret so well that most of their friends didn't know they are adopted.

The younger the children are now, the more likely they are to try to keep it a secret that they are adopted. Just under half (47%) of those aged under 11 told us they tried to keep it a secret, just over a third (37%) of those aged 11 to 13 said they tried to keep it a secret, and just under a quarter (24%) of those now aged 14 or more said they tried to keep it a secret.

There were 6 main reasons for people trying to keep being adopted a secret:

Why over a third of adopted children try to keep it a secret

Because you can't trust people you don't know well enough to tell them

Because you could be teased about being adopted

Because you don't want people to keep asking you questions about it

Because you don't want to be treated any differently

Because it's none of anybody else's business

Because it's something private that others might pass on when you don't want them to.

Just over a quarter (26%) of all the children said they felt they **couldn't trust people they didn't know well with the information that they were adopted**; *"I have to decide if they are safe to tell"*. Just under a quarter (23%) said they tried to keep

"I don't care if they take the mick, because I know I'm special and get a second go at life"

being adopted a secret because they were worried **they might be teased if people knew**. 18% said they didn't tell people they were adopted because **it leads to people asking lots of questions**; *"it leads to questions and brings back memories"*.

One person told us that people knowing they were adopted did lead to teasing, but they were so pleased they had been adopted that they didn't mind this; *"I don't care if they take the mick, because I know I'm special and get a second go at life"*.

On the other hand, **very many people don't mind other people knowing they are adopted**, *"being adopted is part of who I am"*

Many positively want to tell people about it; *"I am proud to say I'm adopted"*, *"I am proud to be adopted because I am in a family that love me"*. For a lot of children and young people, they **didn't mind people knowing they are adopted, but they wouldn't go out of their way to tell people either**: *"I don't shout it from the rooftops, but I don't feel embarrassed or that I have to keep it a secret"*. *"I feel that being adopted is a large part of me – I will never hide any part of my family, current or birth family"*.



Other messages about adoption

There is one important message about adoption that needs to be put in this report, even though it came from foster children rather than from this survey of adopted children and young people. This is that very **many foster children have told us that they don't want to be pushed into being adopted if they want to stay fostered** as they are. As we have said in another of our reports, children have strongly told us that fostering is one thing, being adopted is quite another, your plans should be for which of these is best for you as an individual, and adoption shouldn't be put forward for anyone just because councils want to get as many children adopted as possible.

When we do any sort of survey, like this one using our special "question cards", we do of course choose the questions we are going to ask. Just in case people want to tell us things we hadn't asked about, at the end we always ask if there is anything else people want to tell us. In this survey about adoption, very many children and young people used this section of their question cards to write lots more messages about adoption for us to put in this report. They told us very many different – and difficult – things about how they felt about being adopted.

We heard about **how difficult life before adoption had been for many children**. Some told us how they were angry that social workers had **left them so long with a birth family where they were not being treated well**. Some said that they had been **moved around so many different foster placements before being adopted, that they had found it hard in the end to believe that anyone really wanted them at all**. They had found it hard to settle down with their adoptive family, and very often had behaviour problems until things settled down for them. Some young people suggested that more **counselling should be available for adopted people to help them cope with their feelings about the past, if they wanted this**.

Some wanted to tell us **how much adoption had meant to them**, like the person who wrote to us *"I would like to tell you that I am very lucky to have such a good mum, dad and brother". "Adoption is a good thing which helps children and their birth parents"*.

"Adoption is a good thing which helps children and their birth parents"

Many told us **how they still felt about their birth parents, sometimes badly, but often positively. Remembering your past, and your birth family as well as your adoptive family, did make things different sometimes**. One person told us that they had learned not to be embarrassed that they had been abused before they were adopted, but that they found it very hard when some people didn't believe they had had such a past.

"Adoption can be a scary, sad and happy experience"

We heard that **being an adopted child is no different to being a child in another family, but you do have memories of your past.** Some told us that they were very clear that adopted children are normal, but said that they did have problems sometimes of feeling **confused about why they had to be adopted and why their adoptive family chose them rather than someone else.** One person wrote about how they felt about having two families; *"I love being adopted. Love my mum and dad, but also love my birth mum and dad"*.

"I love being adopted. Love my mum and dad, but also love my birth mum and dad"

One person wrote a lot about how there is a big **difference between being adopted as a baby, and being adopted when you are older.** When you are older, you have more memories and feelings about the past before you were adopted. As a baby, there are fewer memories or feelings – but you are still likely to become curious about your birth family as you grow older and want to know about them, even if you have no memories of them.

Many told us about how they were very **sad to lose contact with their birth brothers and sisters.** This was often more complicated than just being placed in different



places. Sometimes an adopted child found it hard to understand why their brothers or sisters had been allowed to stay with their birth parents, but they had been moved away. Some told us that they had lost contact with brothers and sisters after a time, or sometimes that social services or the courts had suddenly said they were to have no more contact with brothers or sisters. They had not been given any reasons why. Sometimes they blamed themselves, but didn't know what they had done to deserve their contact being stopped.

Some told us how they **hoped to meet their birth parents again one day**. Many said they were very happy staying with their adoptive parents, but still wanted to know about their birth parents. One person wrote to us about how they would like to meet their birth mother, but were worried that their adoptive parents wouldn't like them doing this, and this was a real worry for them.

Some said they had been told they could only meet their birth parents when they were 18, and this seemed a long time away, and some thought it was unfair that only older adopted people were allowed to meet their birth parents again. Others said they simply wanted to know how they could make some sort of contact with their birth family. One wrote that contact should depend on what was best in each individual's case, not on a general rule or age when you were old enough to decide things for yourself.

We heard from some people how **other people's ideas of what adoption means can be a problem**. Many told us that other people could start to feel "sorry" for an adopted person, and assume all sorts of things about them. Lots of people wrote to us about how other people asked all sorts of questions, which depended on what their own ideas about adoption were. You often didn't want to keep answering other people's questions and sorting out their ideas and curiosity.

Some adopted people had been foster children in the past, and their adoptive families still had some foster children in them. Some found this very confusing; ***"it's strange living with people who foster"***.

***"It's strange
living with people
who foster"***

The last words go to what three children told us about how they felt being adopted:

*“Adoption is great and it’s the start of a new life.
It’s fun and exciting”*

*“As long as the social worker picks the correct family for the
child, the child will have a happy normal life”*

“Adoption can be a scary, sad and happy experience”



Annexe

Some Adoptive Parents' Views

As well as finding out what children themselves think, my legal duties include finding out what parents think where I believe that is appropriate. Four adoptive parents sent in their own views about adoption to us, in three cases as well as getting their children to send in their views, and in one case instead of passing on our question cards to their child. What these four wrote to us cannot be taken as in any way typical of what adoptive parents in general might think, but I believe they deserve to be reported as four very different examples of what adoption can be like from the adoptive parents' point of view.

One adoptive parent gave us their ideas on how to improve adoption for children in the future. There would need to be more social workers to speed up the process, and to stop children having to wait a long time in a placement that is not right for them or having to move from place to place before they are adopted. They also suggested that there could be two social workers for each child, so that things didn't get held up when one was away or one left. They also thought that social workers should be trained more, have smaller caseloads and help adoptive parents more, both before and after the child goes to live with them, and with any particular needs the child may have.

The same parent listed some things they thought were bad for adopted children. One was the way that councils (or social workers) can be seen as doing better the more adoptions they manage to make. Another was too many rules about how adoptions should be done, because different children might need things done in different ways. The third was that people working with adopted children (for example in school) need to know about how past problems in getting attached to different parents can make a big difference in so many ways.

Other points this parent made were that social workers need to be able to help decide how much information about their past and their birth families children should be given as they grow up and can cope with it, and that children do need to be told, very carefully and sensitively indeed, just why their birth families couldn't look after them. On keeping contact with birth parents, they said that this must always be when it is right for the individual child, and you cannot make rules for all children about this. Like some of the children, they told us that schools sometimes make things hard for adopted children when they ask children to bring in baby pictures or do family trees or lessons on how people inherit what they are like from their parents.

Another adoptive parent told us just how much difference having a good or bad social worker can make to both the adopted child and their adoptive parents. They had adopted two children. The first adoption went well. The second one had many

problems in the way social workers handled it. The social worker had seemed to be more concerned about the birth family rather than either the child or the adoptive parents. They said this had led to decisions being made that both the child and their new parents found very difficult to cope with – for example about having a lot of contact with the child’s birth family after they were adopted. They also said that they had to have meetings in their house that involved up to six social workers at the same time, and went on for hours at a time, which the child found very hard to cope with. This parent had two clear messages for us – one was that everyone involved in adoption must focus on what the child needs once their adoption begins, not what their birth families need, and that social workers must always think about how to support the adoptive parents to make the placement work for the child.

The third adoptive parent wrote to us to tell us that they feel a little bitter that when they adopted a child, they were not told enough information about the child’s disabilities, which turned out to be very much more severe than they had been told. They now consider that the failure of “experts” to diagnose and tell them about problems properly meant that their own lives had been changed for ever in ways that they couldn’t have expected, and they wanted us to think about “adopters’ rights”, as well as children’s rights to be adopted.

The last of the four parents wrote to tell us of how the life of their adopted child, and their own, had been made extremely difficult when social services had accidentally passed on to their child a lot of information about their birth family and about how their child’s birth siblings were back with their birth family. The adoptive parents were not able to get the help they and the child needed from either social services or a voluntary organisation until two years later, because of funding problems, and the child refused to work any more with social workers.

Photographs illustrating this report are from John Birdsall Social Issues Library and are model released.

If you have any comments regarding this report
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November 2006

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