

From sad times to happier times: Post-adoption support

Adoption these days isn't about taking on a young baby and living together happily ever after. Most children who need permanent placements are older, in sibling groups and have gone through traumatic experiences in their birth families.

And the problem for those looking to adopt is no one tells you how difficult it can be adopting this group of children, the emotional stress it can cause and the impact it can have on your lives. And once adoptive parents do find out, post-adoption, they often struggle to access the vital support they need.

Sarah and Tom Johnston adopted four children, all siblings - Sophie (7), Tim (6), Annie (5) and Sam (3) – in 2007, which has been extremely challenging and difficult for them. Prior to adoption, the four children were split up in foster homes, so when they started living together under one roof, they were vying for their parent's attention and competing against each other.

Sarah, who was 30 at the time, says: "We didn't have a clue what we were entering. The social workers didn't tell us anything or what to expect. Things didn't go brilliantly at first. Our oldest daughter Sophie was violent and would often bite and kick me. This was extreme levels of violence. The other three children were frightened of her and we were at a loss at what to do."

Out of frustration and stress, one day Sarah ended up slapping Sophie. She told the local authority, which placed the children, expecting them to offer some form of support. But the authority said Sarah and Tom weren't able to manage the children and that they would take them off them.

Over a two-year battle, the Johnstons fought to keep the four children and secured funding for a therapy package to provide therapy for the children – but not enough to see them through their whole childhood.

In 2009, the family started going to therapy at Family Futures. Although at times it was difficult emotionally, on reflection Sarah says that if it wasn't for Family Futures, her family wouldn't still be together. She thinks Sophie would have been put in care permanently and the family broken up.

The family bonding activities and exercises, as part of the treatment programme, helped the family to learn more about each other. Family Futures also supported them to have contact with the children's birth mum.

Sarah explains: "Although the therapy reminded me of the difficult times during the adoption process, I felt empowered by the therapy. I realised the children's actions and words weren't personal. They were frightened and angry at their birth mum. It made me realise I am a good mum and Tom and I have learnt how to parent four children, who don't understand actions and consequences, in a different way."

Unexpectedly Sarah and Tom, who didn't think they could have their own children, had a fifth child in 2012. Luke, who is now four years old, threw the other four children's lives upside down. Sam was no longer the youngest in the family and Sarah found all four children were competing for her attention.

In 2015, Sophie, who was stressed at the time due to her GCSES, was really struggling with her emotions and her violence peaked. "She wanted attention but I wasn't able to give her this as I was looking after Luke," explains Sarah. A child protection order was placed on Luke and Sophie went into care for six months. During this time, although the funding for post-adoption support had run out, Family Futures visited Sophie several times in care to provide continued therapy.

Fast forward a year later, and Sophie is now back at home and doing incredibly well. She has just completed her GCSES and has started college. She's even thinking about university in the future.

Sarah says: "I want Sophie to have choices and now she has this. If it wasn't for Family Futures, I think things would have been very different. She's emotionally healthy. She has an impulsive personality but is now able to reflect on the therapy she's had.

"She has survived this and will now have a life. I think before she would have ended up in an abusive relationship. Now she realises she doesn't have to have a baby just to experience the feeling of being loved."

Tim is also doing incredibly well and Sarah hopes he will move in the direction that Sophie has. Both Sophie and Tim are part of Family Futures' Young People's Forum, giving young people the chance to meet with other adopted people. Sarah says both Sophie and Tim really enjoy the regularly monthly outings and activities as they value belonging to a network and feeling cared about. The staff member running the forum is also going to be supporting Sophie and Tim with their college and school work.

Things have also improved at home, although the four older children still fight. Sarah explains that as a result of their experiences, their fighting is heightened, more so than in sibling groups who aren't adopted. Sarah and Tom are conscious about changing the family dynamics so it's a unit of five, not four plus one, as it first was when Luke was born. Sarah has swapped photographs around on the walls so its pictures of the family all together, not Luke separate to the four oldest.

Sarah says that for the first few years following the adoption, her and Tom felt sad and under a cloud. She was also on anti-depressants for a while. She explains, though, that "because of Family Futures, although it's still difficult, we are now having genuinely, happy times."