

## **Post adoption support: Making the adoption journey more manageable**

Jane Houghton and Jonathan Walsh adopted their two children (Ryan and Brooke) 11 years ago when they were two and three years old. They had previously had three foster carers and a known birth family history of drug abuse, prostitution, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Both children were profoundly traumatised. In the first few years, Jane and Jonathan felt they were able to put the two children "under their wing" and provide them with a safe home environment, but as time went on, they realised they needed support.

Ryan was self harming, he was violent towards Jane and Jonathan, and regularly getting upset. When he didn't get what he wanted, he would become abusive to the family or himself. "It was hard to witness in such a young child, these seemed like more than tantrums, but you expect younger children to get upset. When they continued after Ryan was seven, it was clear we needed more help," explains Jane.

The family was already under a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team but describe the service they were receiving then as "completely inappropriate". Rather than being supported by a team working with Looked After children specifically, they were treated by a generic team who saw the children's challenging behaviour as an indication that they were being badly parented.

"It felt like the finger was being pointed at us. We had been through so much to become parents, including preparation classes, volunteering in a local nursery, we were both experienced with children and were very well read on adoption-related issues. Yet we were treated by this CAMHS team like we were the problem, not the solution," says Jane.

Despite Jane and Jonathan doing their best, the situation with Ryan escalated until social services intervened and provided the family with three years of funding to attend Family Futures, which Jane and Jonathan had heard about through the Adoption UK Helpline.

Jane says: "Right from the start we knew we were in the right place. It was such a relief to speak to someone who understood what we were going through and didn't blame us for it. The Family Futures model is so personal, holistic and flexible — they don't get blinded by methods that aren't working. They have even come to visit us at home when Ryan has refused to go to them."

As a result of the treatment programme, Ryan has disclosed previously unknown information about his past and is much more able to share his true feelings in therapy. The parents report that Brooke who was compliant and somewhat victimised by her brother before coming to Family Futures is now much more resilient and able to talk about her feelings, seeking out help when she needs it.

Jane and Jonathan have also learnt a lot from the therapy, including how to parent two children who are often unable to understand the consequences of their actions. "When things get tough, I channel my inner therapist and try to think what she would do," says Jane.

After the first three years the funding was withdrawn, and the family had to return for support to their local CAMHS. Ryan in particular hated going there, says Jane:

"The environment was institutional and unwelcoming, unlike Family Futures which provides beautiful themed rooms, colourful soft furnishings, sensory toys and snacks. When you've been going in and out of institutions for much of your early childhood, it's no wonder you're scared of them. CAMHS felt like a prison waiting room to him."

But in 2015, when the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) came through, the family were able to return to Family Futures for therapy and have been seeing the team regularly ever since.

Following Family Futures' recommendations, and with the help of a new Looked After Children's CAMHS team, Ryan (now 14) is now on medication, which helps him to calm, sleep and access the therapy more readily. The team attend regular joint meetings with CAMHS and social services and provide Ryan with a mentoring service as well as therapy for the whole family.

Jane says: "It's still challenging and we're constantly exhausted, but things are much more manageable than they were. Family Futures have gone above and beyond any regular therapeutic service to help us survive. Without their input and support, I honestly think social services would have taken the children away by now."

Until recently, the family were hopeful about getting a further year of funding secured, but the government's October 2016 announcement about limiting ASF now leaves that in doubt.