

A photograph of a woman with curly hair and sunglasses smiling at a child in a grey hooded jacket on a city street. The woman is holding the child's hands. In the background, there are city buildings, a red stop sign with the word 'ARRÊT' on it, and a white arrow sign pointing left.

sensitive
matters

Helping find the right words

Different paths to parenthood

Hints and tips when embarking
on your donor or adoption journey

There are many ways to build a family. If you find yourself contemplating adoption or the use of a donor and / or surrogate, this booklet is for you.

We have collated comments and experience from parents and professionals and put them together in one place to help your thinking.



Sali
Founder and CEO

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We have some key pieces of advice:

- If you are thinking of adopting or using a donor, listen to the voices of adopted or donor conceived people – they are who our children will be in the future. Their experience matters.
- Understand what parents who have already gone down your route to build a family are concerned about – their concerns may be different from your current concerns.
- At Sensitive Matters we believe children have a right to know their story. We encourage parents to tell their children as much as possible about their donor, surrogate or birth family. Tell them as early as you can ... and keep telling them, sharing more as they develop.

We hope you find this booklet helpful. Don't hesitate to get in touch with any questions, suggestions or comments.

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Egg and sperm donation with
or without surrogacy



How do people feel about using a donor?

Sali, Founder @sensitive_matters: "It was hard to come to terms with using a donor egg. First you have to let go of the notions that the child will not look like you, have your eyes, or chin or ears or whatever your most endearing quality is. Then you have to wrap your head around the fact that it is NOT like your partner (if you have one) is having a child with someone else. This is all overthinking it. But you do need to have these thoughts, so you can acknowledge them and put them aside.

I didn't go for counselling, but in hindsight, counselling would have helped me get my head around these uncomfortable ideas faster. Using a donor egg is emotional stuff and having a trained professional to navigate those emotions can help.

In case you are thinking, 'Do I really want to do this?' My answer is: yes! My message to you is that it's important to understand what you are about to do, but don't overthink it!

You will one day find yourself the adoring parent of a loving child and facing the same parenting issues as everyone else. And you will feel no distance between you and your child because nurture is a very strong thing, and love is even stronger.

But best of all? The love is returned tenfold."

Emma, @NZDonorConceivedAdults: "You need to deal with your own grief at not having a biological child of your own. Seek professional counselling. Don't sweep this under the carpet thinking everything is fine when you're running around caring for a young child."

@katherinenissen, egg donor mum: "Seek as much counselling as you need on your journey to help you process your journey and grief. Don't be afraid to keep dipping into counselling when you need it. Know that all of the heartache, tears and worry is worth it."

Gena Jaffe, www.connectingrainbows.org: "Don't underestimate the discomfort around donor conception. You will need to work through some hard stuff – not having a genetic connection to your beloved child hurts; knowing someone else out there shares something very special with your child hurts; thinking that your child may want to know them, and as a parent, hurts. You will have to keep reminding yourself: it's MY job to support them. This is THEIR journey, not mine. My advice is to start working on yourselves as parents before your child is even born."

Will the baby feel like mine?



Jana Rupnow, LPC in her book *Three Makes Baby* talks at length about parental legitimacy. "Will I feel like my child's real parent? Intended parents with no genetic connection often wonder if they will be

able to love their child as much as a biological child, and parents sometimes worry that their child will have negative feelings towards them." Jana has some great exercises for parents and future parents. "Thankfully, a genetic connection is not required for the parent-child attachment process to occur because of the nature of attachment."

@katherinenissen: "I worried constantly through my pregnancy that I wouldn't bond with my baby and thought I was the only person to ever feel like that. The second she was born, the overwhelming love hit me, and I've felt connected to her from day one. There are still days that I wish my journey to my daughter was different, but I'm so grateful to have this opportunity and I can't imagine life without her. Some of the pain of infertility disappears once you have your child, but there are still times that it hits you. Although this may be seen as a negative thing, I then remember that that is what makes me particularly lucky and makes me enjoy every moment – even the sleep deprived ones!"

Marna Gatlin and Carole LieberWilkins, MFT in their book *Let's Talk About Egg Donation* say: "Intended parents from around the globe all say the same thing – 'I only wish I would've known that having a baby via egg donation would have no effect on how I feel about my children.' So, here's the thing: we love our kids. That's the bottom line. It doesn't matter whether or not we share DNA – they are our children. They may make us crazy and give us gray hair, but we love them so much that sometimes we forget to breathe"

Eloise and her husband used a sperm donor: "When we realised that we were pregnant there were so many mixed feelings from pure elation to apprehension. And though we were of course delighted, throughout the pregnancy my husband had a few wobbles, mainly at milestone scans. He had thoughts like 'was I carrying 'someone else's child'. Despite these feelings, finding out the sex of the baby helped and when each of our children was born, these feelings quickly disappeared, and we couldn't imagine having any other children of our own".

So, here's the thing: we love our kids. That's the bottom line. It doesn't matter whether or not we share DNA – they are our children. They may make us crazy and give us gray hair, but we love them so much that sometimes we forget to breathe

Marna and Carole

Should I use a known or anonymous donor?

The laws pertaining to donor anonymity vary. If the option is open to you, spend time making the decision whether to use an anonymous or known donor.

In the most recent Donor Conceived Survey (www.wearedonorconceived.com/2020-survey) 70% of respondents believe they have been harmed by not knowing their donor's identity and 80% believe they have been harmed by not knowing their donor's medical history.



Sali: "10 years into an IVF journey, the thought of using a donor egg was daunting. At the time I was wrestling with my own grief and so the thought of using a known donor would have been very intimidating and threatening to my role as mother. But now my son is nearly five, I feel differently. Back then, I wish I could have known how I would think now. I hope these points help inform your choices:

- Now, I wish I knew the egg donor. I want to thank her and hug her and show-off my beautiful child to her. She is not a threat to me. I am his mother, but she gave him her genes. She is a part of our family and I feel only love for her.
- Now I am sad that it is possible my son will never meet her. I hope she will choose to make herself known on the Donor Sibling Registry. If not, I will help him find her.
- Had I known how I would feel as a parent of a donor conceived child, I would have asked the clinic if our donor was willing to be known, or asked about known donors. At the time, I was thinking about me and how threatened my role felt (understandable when you are living the stress and drama of infertility). But once the baby comes, you become a parent and your focus is all about what's best for him. What would be best for him is that he could at least know the wonderful woman who helped us to have him.

I know I am not the only mother of a donor egg conceived child that feels this way."

Marna and Carole, Let's Talk About Egg Donation: "The majority of intended parents wish they had met their donor. Parents often look for their donor on the internet, hoping to make some sort of connection. Embarking on an anonymous egg donation cycle is a very common regret."

How your child might feel about the donor

Take a moment to think about what your child will want to know about your donor, how they will refer to this person . . . If it was you, what would you feel / want to know? Accept that if you feel a genetic loss, your future child might too.

The quotes that follow give an indication of how your child might feel. They don't directly relate to whether you should use a known or anonymous donor, but they give an insight into how your child might feel about your donor. Which might help inform your decision. They highlight that your donor provides 50% of their DNA. Whilst you might be tempted to shy away from this fact, that is how it is. Embracing this now could make your journey a lot smoother.

Shannon, @DonorConceived101: "Donor Conceived People often have to fight to call our biological parent what we choose, and often our voices are overshadowed by parents calling their donor their children's donor. The donation was made to the parents – they can refer to their donor if they wish. But to the child they have a biological parent, not a donor. While some DCP may be fine talking about their donor, as DCP it's our choice how we refer to them."

Lindsay Elise Blount gives us food for thought in this wonderfully worded quote: "My mom's donor is not my donor. He didn't donate sperm to me. He is my biological father (I've confirmed that he identifies as a man, so I can say bio father). I am not half sperm donor, half my mom. I know this because I'm not walking around half human, half sperm. I am made up of my mom and my biological father. Therefore, I don't have a donor. I call him by his first name to my friends and family and I call him my 'biological father' to those that don't know his identity."

Hayley, @dcp_journey_2_rp, is both donor conceived and a recipient parent. "Before I met my parent's sperm donor (who was anon) I referred to him as 'the donor', but when I located him via DNA testing, I then referred to him by his first name - but also now prefer 'biological father' or my parent's donor when talking about him to someone else.

We have four-and-a-half-year-old DC twins using an open ID at 18 donor (we are in the UK). I'm in a gay relationship. We have begun to interchange terms like 'the donor' and 'bio father' when reading DC related story books or when we talk about our children's biological father (our sperm donor). Our aim is to expose our children to lots of different terms so that as they get older and begin to understand more, they will be able to make a choice about which they prefer - and will know that as parents we won't be offended by any they choose!"



Genetics have a big influence. Try and see it as not taking anything away from you, but instead that your child, in addition to your family, has a biological parent - they have more, rather than you have less.

Emma

Emma, @NZDonorConceivedAdults:

"The focus is so much on getting a baby, remember it's good to also think about what it will be like actually raising that baby. Parents should be made aware that when their child grows up they may consider the donor as a biological parent. You can't pretend the donor conception never happened. Think long term about your child as a teenager. Don't minimize the role of their biological parent. What your child looks like, their tastes, how they act, can be attributable to their biological parent – you need to be comfortable with that.

I know donor conceived people that meet up with their biological parent later in life and find freakish things like their handwriting is similar. One chap I helped to connect with his biological father discovered they were both obsessed with boxing, something he'd never shared with his Dad. Biological parents are so much more than 'just a donor'. Genetics have a big influence. Try and see it as not taking anything away from you, but instead that your child, in addition to your family, has a biological parent - they have more, rather than you have less."

Gather as much information about your donor as you can

If your donor is anonymous, be sure to gather as much information about them as you possibly can. **Carole LieberWilkins**, Marriage and Family Therapist: "Details matter, because every shred of information was helpful years later when I started talking with my son."

If you have the choice about anonymity, put yourself in your future child's shoes . . . and then make a considered decision . . . and then follow a no regrets policy.

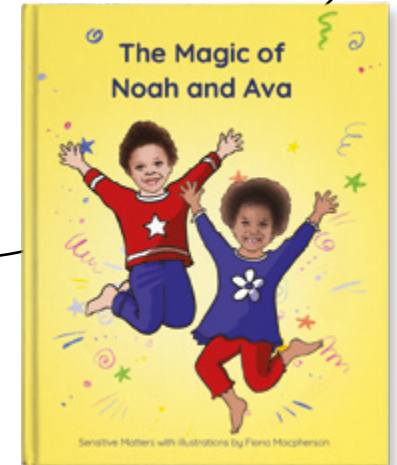
That said, **Nancy Block** @privatelabelsurrogacy points out: "If you used an anonymous donor, but later decide you do want to get in touch with them, then ask your agency. I've found that most donors are willing to have contact through a third party or even direct. By the time you do want to get in touch, many are moms themselves so feel very differently about it all."

sensitive matters

Helping find the right words

The Magic of You

Avatars version – you and your child star in their very own story



We make the only **100% customisable** books to help parents tell their children about their donor conception, surrogacy, fostering or adoption.

There are default story versions for:

- Hetero, same sex and single parent families
- Donor egg, sperm or embryo
- With or without a surrogate

sensitivematters.net

Surrogacy - what do I need to consider?

Countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria prohibit all forms of surrogacy.

In some countries including the UK, Ireland, Denmark and Belgium, surrogacy is allowed where the surrogate is not paid, or only paid for reasonable expenses. Paying a fee (known as commercial surrogacy) is prohibited – though in the UK it is the family court that monitors this as part of the parental order process and none have been turned down because the surrogate was paid too much.

How it works in the UK

It is illegal for an organisation to profit from matching a surrogate with intended parents. Intended parents cannot advertise to help find a surrogate. There is therefore a shortage of surrogates – you will need to be patient.

The options for finding a surrogate are:

- A non-profit surrogacy organisation or agency – the main four in the UK are Brilliant Beginnings, COTS, Surrogacy UK and www.mysurrogacyjourney.com.
- A friend or family member.
- An independent surrogate found via social media or the internet. **NGA Law:** “There are many websites and closed Facebook groups where intended parents and UK surrogates find each other. Independent surrogacy arrangements can be successful but there is much less screening and support than if you work with an organisation. We would always advise that you get to know your surrogate before moving forward, follow all the same steps you would follow if working with an organisation and seek legal advice before progressing your plans.”
- International surrogacy.

Commercial surrogacy is legal in some US states and countries including India, Russia and Ukraine.

People may go abroad if their home country does not allow surrogacy or if they cannot find a surrogate.

Whist surrogacy agreements are not enforceable, they are a great way of talking through the potential pitfalls and make all arrangements, including financial compensation, very clear.

The surrogate is deemed to be the legal mother and her spouse as the second legal parent before the parental order is made. Where she is single the biological father will usually be the child's legal father. The surrogate and her spouse (if relevant) will be named on the original birth certificate. When the child is 18 they have access to this.

Costs vary depending on how much you pay your surrogate, whether you pay an agency, the level of legal service you choose, and the number of IVF cycles needed. If you use a full agency service they amount on average (for one cycle) to between £33,000 and £60,000.

International surrogacy costs vary considerably from country to country, with a range of £40,000 to £220,000 depending on where you go.

How it works in the US

There are several ways to find your surrogate:

- Surrogacy agencies and matching professionals – they take care of most of the process including:
 - Sourcing and screening surrogates (medical, legal, psychological clearance)
 - Managing the surrogate's fertility treatments, prenatal care and oversight during the pregnancy
 - Managing the matching process
 - Acting as liaison with the clinic, donor agency, lawyers, and other service providers
 - Managing the surrogate's compensation, as well as the escrow account and journey finances
 - Educating the Intended Parents, and keeping them informed throughout the journey
- Surrogacy Clinics – They usually cover screening and matching, but involvement usually ceases after the medical process is complete.

- A friend or family member.
- Online support groups and classifieds – Finding a surrogate online is one of the most popular methods.

Fees vary depending on the service, the location and how much you pay your surrogate. The full cost without the IVF cycle usually amounts to between \$110,000 and \$170,000, payable over the period of the pregnancy.



What to think about when choosing a surrogacy agency?

Nancy Block, @privatelabelsurrogacy: You want to investigate the agency's experience and medical knowledge. Ensure they cover all the services you require e.g., liaising with attorneys, escrow arrangements, sorting a fertility clinic with satisfactory recent live birth rate etc. Choose an agency that is responsive – it's really important they keep in regular contact and are open and transparent. Look at their testimonials and customer feedback.

To tell or not to tell?

There may be some unique circumstances where telling puts you or your child at risk, but aside from these, we feel it is unethical not to tell.

Emma, @NZDonorConceivedAdults: "Not telling your child they're donor conceived is just not an option".

Kim Bergman, author of *Your Future Family*, urges parents to stop lying about their child's origins. When she found out that her mum had lied to her about her father, she says: "I actually had a mini identity crisis because the story of my life was that my dear, loving father had died in a car accident while my mother was pregnant with me. So, I can tell you from personal experience that finding out your real story when you're 18 or 20 years old is not ideal. I know that my mom thought she was protecting me from a story she thought would be hard for me to accept or understand, but the truth is always the best way to go."

Sali: "If you're at the beginning of your journey, a baby may seem like an unattainable goal, but it's not. And one day, it will work, especially if you are using donor eggs or sperm. Although right now the story is dominated by you and your feelings, try to remember that in the end, it isn't your story."

You are making a human being that will grow up to have their own feelings and personality. They are made up of their DNA that will be with them long after the anguish and struggles of having a baby is over for you. The information about how they came to be belongs to them: it is their story."

The information about how they came to be belongs to them: it is their story.

Sali



When to tell and how?

The Donor Conceived Survey evidence shows that donor conceived children who are told early have a more positive experience than those that find out later.

The ethics committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) advocates early disclosure to donor conceived children and cites the benefits of telling early as:

- More positive outcomes for the child
- Limiting the anticipatory anxiety of the parent leading up to 'telling'
- Allowing the child to grow up knowing about their origins rather than having to undo beliefs about genetic relatedness to parents later on
- Avoiding unplanned disclosure (for example through genetic testing) which evidence shows DC individuals respond to more negatively.

A National Center for Biotechnology Information academic survey cites a study carried out in 1998 involving adopted families which "show that the earlier children were informed about their adoption, the better the outcome in terms of their emotional and identity development, and it is now recommended that children are told about their adoption in the preschool years".

but part of a positive story of being a very wanted child. Because the book was read aloud over and over again, it was a gradual process of understanding what being donor conceived meant. The older I got, the more nuances I understood, and more questions I asked.

There was never a time when I was sat down and told about my conception. It has always been a natural part of our family and everyday life for as long as I can remember. I have been incredibly happy about the choices my parents made, and it has had a great impact on my perception of being a donor child."

Sali: "Telling your child when they are very little means there will never be a reveal moment, no awkward sitting down and 'We've got something important to tell you...' When they are little they easily absorb what you are telling them, so keep telling them, and when the questions do come, answer them simply and openly."

Whilst they are very young they won't grasp all the complexities of what you are saying, but it allows you to practice your narrative, getting comfortable with telling them their story."

Story books are of course a great tool to facilitate telling, and our own Sensitive Matters books allow you to edit the story and add your own photos, so it is completely your family story.



Emma (@DonorChild) is very open about being donor conceived and considers herself fortunate in having known about the donor from a very early age:

"My parents have never kept it a secret that I am a donor conceived child. From as far back as I can remember they read me a bedtime story book about how I came to be. The book talked about the nice man who helped my parents have me. He has never been a secret,

The Magic of You

Photo version – quick and easy to make with engaging clipart

“Telling your child how they came to be doesn’t have to be hard!

There are so many beautiful pages

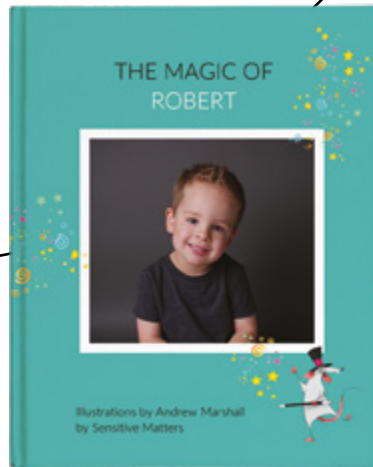
in this book, and everything is customizable. I was able to change the words, photos, colors etc. and I

am so happy with how it turned out.”

Victoria, @expecting anything

There are default story versions for:

- Hetero, same sex and single parent families
- Donor egg, sperm or embryo
- With or without a surrogate



What about half siblings?

If you discovered you had siblings you didn't grow up with, wouldn't you want to know all about them? Want to meet them? Your child will most likely want to find out about siblings at some point. Expect this. Consider whether you will register with the donor sibling registry, and even look forward to getting notified of a match one day.

Wendy Kramer, Founder of the Donor Sibling Registry, in her book Finding Our Families argues: “If the desire for a biological connection is strong enough to make adults choose donor conception, then it is the ultimate double standard to imagine that the desire for a biological connection will not be felt just as strongly by the donor conceived child. The Donor Sibling Registry, the largest website where members of the donor community can find each other and share their experiences, has revealed the true magnitude of this natural genetic longing.”



Freya from @unicorndcp: “A few months ago prior to starting treatment for a second child, my wife and I decided we would like to know if our daughter has any half siblings yet from the same donor.

I joined a WhatsApp group for people who used our fertility clinic, trying to find siblings, but didn't get any matches. I was starting to feel a bit crestfallen!

Wondering if there just weren't any yet, I contacted the clinic. The HFEA waitlist for info on siblings (just gender and year born) is eight months, and we want to start trying before then, so I was eager to find out.

Within an hour, they emailed back – she has two brothers and a sister! Just knowing this is a relief somehow. Now I know that there are siblings out there that we can try and connect with, and as my wife said: ‘At least we know he makes boys!’

Then through a Facebook group we created we have amazingly matched with one of her siblings – a sister! We just want the information so we can tell her when she asks, rather than have no clue. And hey, maybe one day we'll be able to say: ‘Your sister lives in Salford’ and if she wants to do more with that information, we can help her.

That is a journey we will navigate together, but during the process of setting up the group we were faced with parents asking: ‘Why would anyone want to do that?’. I spent ages trying to figure out what I wanted to say to them. I’ve eventually found it . . .

When I think about the options, there are two: 1) our child knows her donor siblings as a child, or 2) she finds them (hopefully) at 18. The downsides of finding them as a child – she turns around and says she wishes she hadn't. The downsides of finding them as an adult – she tells us she's angry that we had the option for her to grow up with half siblings and we denied her that.

Now, honestly? That doesn't seem like a dilemma to me. Regret comes from loss – the loss of a potential relationship, the loss of potential experiences. Is she likely to be mad at us because she DID grow up knowing them?

I'm happy with our decision to try and find her siblings whilst she's small. Look, I don't want playdates every weekend – I don't even know if we'll meet anytime soon. But knowing they're out there gives us, and HER more importantly, the choice. And it's the lack of choice that makes most donor conceived people feel anger.”

Regret comes from loss – the loss of a potential relationship, the loss of potential experiences.

Freya

Any other tips?

@katherinenissen, egg donor mum,: Don't be afraid to educate health professionals who may not have come across egg donation before. I've had some ridiculous comments from some health professionals, and I've had to be calm and challenge assumptions. I like to think this will help someone coming behind me.

Emma @NZDonorConceivedAdults: "Read the fine print. For example, for identity release donors, does the organisation keep contact detail updated? – will your child be able to actually find the donor in 18 years' time if that's your plan. How robust are their processes to record medical histories? – are they just self-reported, or do they verify information against medical records and are medical records regularly updated?"

Hayley, @dcp_journey_2_rp, a late discovery DCP: So a practical tip: don't be afraid to ask your clinic or donor bank questions! Specifically in relation to your donor - what are their limits on number of babies, which countries will donations be used in? And emotional advice: be cognizant of the issues surrounding donor conception, yet don't be consumed by it. DC can be so amazing and has allowed so many of to become parents who otherwise would not have been. It's so important to remember all of the positive and joyful moments surrounding donor conception as well as acknowledging the sometimes-difficult times.

@two.brisbane.mumas: The best advice we were given was to simply start the search early as there aren't many [donors] to choose from. Also, to trust the universe that the right donor will be there waiting for you too.

Victoria, @expectinganything: My best advice is to grieve halfway before taking the leap into donor conception, it's not realistic to think you will grieve 100%, the baby will take you the rest of the way.

Where can I find help and support?

Whether you are a hetero, same sex or single parent family, talking about what you are going through helps. And the help can vary from things to consider when choosing a donor, to understanding the many faces of grief, to feelings towards the donor, to what clinic to use...

- Join an online community with people going through what you are going through. Start today.
- Listen to donor conceived people to understand how your child might feel so that you are prepared.

Shannon, @DonorConceived101, found out as an adult that she was donor conceived: I notice that many recipient parents do not follow donor conceived people on social media – I think they should, to get an insight into the things their child might experience when they get older. Their genetic parent is going to be important to the donor conceived person never mind how much the intended parents would rather their involvement was played down.



Mel, @the_stork_and_i: Find your tribe. Find the people who really get what you're going through that can support you on this journey.

Talking to friends and family about what you are going through is a personal choice. An advantage of openness now is you take people on your journey. However, weigh this up against the risk you might not get the support and encouragement you are hoping for.

But do reach out to a counsellor now, don't wait – start with an organization with a list of fertility and related counsellors working in your area e.g., BICA (UK), ASRM (US), Fertility Matters Canada, ANZICA (Australia & New Zealand), Spanish Fertility Society, Germany Society for Fertility Counselling, Maia Association (France).

Our favourite books for intended parents:

John Hesla, MD, PVED: Intended parents who will use assisted reproductive technology have to become educated in reproductive biology, genetics, psychology, and law to make the right choices on how to create their families.

Here are some suggestions to help you:

- Let's Talk About Egg Donation; Marna Gatlin, Founder of Parents Via Egg Donation, and Carole LieberWilkins, MFT
- Three Makes Baby, How to Parent Your Donor Conceived Child; Jana Rupnow, LPC
- Finding Our Families; Wendy Cramer, Founder of the Donor Sibling Registry
- Surrogacy Was the Way: Twenty Intended Mothers Tell Their Stories; Zara Griswold

Children's books that help with telling:

Our Magic of You books, with story versions for traditional, same sex and single families, using donor egg, sperm or embryo, with / without a surrogate are completely editable – you can change all of the text so it truly is YOUR family story. You can add your family photos, modify the clipart illustrations and even change the colour of the pages.

There are several other options of more generic books that aren't customizable. A quick search on Amazon will bring up several of these.

Find your tribe. Find the people who really get what you're going through that can support you on this journey

Mel

Charities that provide support:

www.dcnetwork.org

www.donorconceivedcommunity.org

Good hashtags to follow:

#donorconception #donorconceived #fertility #fertilityjourney #fertilityblog #fertilityawareness #infertility #infertilityawareness #lgbtfamily #samesexparents #gayswithkids #lgbtqbooks #twodads #twomoms #twomums #ivf #ivfjourney #ivfsuccess #ivfcommunity #donoregg #donoreggs #donoreggivf #donorsperm #miraclebaby #deivf #surrogacy #solomom #solodad #soloparent #soloparenting #solomumbychoice #singlemumbychoice #singlemombychoice

Instagram accounts we love:

@donorconceivedaotearoa (Emma)
@DonorChild (Emma, www.donorchildemmagroenbaek.com)
@dcp_journey_2_rp (Hayley)
@donorconceived101 (Shannon)
@fertilityhelphub and @parenting.theribbonbox (Eloise)
@the_lgbt_mummies_tribe
@two.brisbane.mamas (Kat + Kirsten)
@paths_to_parenthub and @definingmum (Becky)
@ivf_got_this_uk (Katy)
@dani_repsch (Proud Donor Egg Mama)
@the_stork_and_i (The Solo Parenthood Coach)
@solo_mummy_bristol_uk_
@expectinganything and @infertilityunfiltered (Victoria)
@genajaffe and @connectingrainbows (Gena, www.connectingrainbows.org)
@privatelabelsurrogacy (Nancy)
@surrogacyukorg
@brillbeginnings
@_ngalaw
@officialmysurrogacyjourney



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Can I choose the child I adopt?

In the UK an adoption agency will try to match you with a child of the age and gender you requested. However, it's possible that your child match may be a year or so older or younger than you requested. You can also give a more general preference like 'below the age of three.'



This child must be **right for you**, this child is going to live with you **forever** if everything goes to plan and you need to be sure of your capabilities – **can you really support this child?**

Aimee

Aimee Cooper adopted siblings and has a vlog covering every stage of the UK adoption process that everyone planning to adopt a baby in the UK should watch: "Once you've been approved as an adopter you will be entered into the database. Social workers for 'waiting children' will see your profile and check if a potential match exists. Equally your social worker will check the local and national databases of waiting children. Timescales vary considerably. Your social worker may have a child in mind that they would like to present you with and so that might move quite quickly. But be prepared, it could take a very long time.

During the assessment process you will have been specific as to what kind of child you want to adopt and what kind of situation you want to adopt into, based on what you know you can handle. You then have to wait. This was one of the hardest parts for me, not being in control and just having to wait. You can keep checking in with the social worker and you just have to have faith that you will be contacted as soon as they find a potential match.

They will then present you with a short profile – a very brief history of that child, their birth and their birth family. If, having discussed this with your support network, you decide to proceed, they then give you very detailed information with all their history to date.

You then must decide whether you want to move forward with this child or not. This child must be right for you, this child is going to live with you forever if everything goes to plan and you need to be sure of your capabilities – can you really support this child? You will need to be open with this child; at some point in their life you will need to talk to them about their history – are you capable of doing that? You must be confident before considering moving forward with a match. Take your time to make the decision and talk through all your thoughts and concerns with your social worker.

If you decide to proceed you will have a meeting with the medical professional that compiled the medical information. Ask them every question you can think of about the child and their birth family history in case your child has medical needs in the future. You will go to a child appreciation day attended by all the professionals that have worked with this child and their birth parents and you can ask them anything. You also build a transition plan that will be best for the child and work for all parties.

The next step is the matching panel. By the time you get to this you will have had all your questions about this child answered. The panel then review your application, ask you lots of questions to ascertain whether you can support this specific child and determine whether a clever match has been made. You will then hopefully be told that the match can go ahead."



Susan Romer, JD, PhD, has been an adoption attorney in the US for 25 years, is a recipient of the US Congressional Angel in Adoption award, and helped us write our adoption books. She is known not only for her legal skills but also for her keen understanding of the emotional issues and pressures in an adoption:

"Babies and toddlers are adopted quickly. Often, adoptive parents want the experience of raising a baby. Also, they have a better sense of control over the nurturing element - hoping to minimise any adverse impact of poor nurturing. This high demand means adopting a child under the age of three may take longer than an older child.

For couples that have specific requirements, for example stipulations regarding the birth parents like no drugs or a perfect medical history, the process often takes longer.

If a match doesn't feel right, wait – this will be hard to do, but it is important. It often takes a year or longer to find the right match."

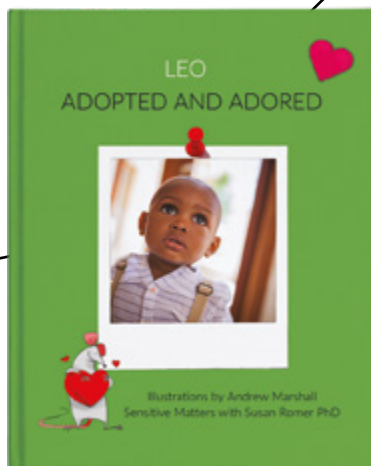
Adopted & Adored

0-4 years – talk to your child about their fostering or adoption

“This book made talking about adoption so easy. It has simple, clear language (every word is editable), there are delightful illustrations and bright, cheery colors. My daughter especially likes the family photos.” **Holly**

There are default story versions for:

- Hetero, same sex and single parent families
- Open or closed adoptions
- From birth, foster care or international



Should I tell my child they are adopted?

If you adopt a child from birth, or when they are very young, you are in a very similar position to a family with a donor conceived child – at some point you will need to tell them their story. Not telling is not an option. And telling them while they are very little has numerous advantages – there will never be an awkward reveal moment, there will be no secrets . . . All the comments and advice in sections 5 and 6 apply equally here. Tell them and tell them early.

Familylives.org.uk: “Children should be raised knowing they were adopted. Adopted children identify with their adopted family but also have their own identity as an adopted child. Some children may need to ask questions to understand what has happened in their life, especially if their adoption brings them into a new culture or environment. This can be the same whether the child is adopted at birth or as an older child. As adoptive parents you can positively influence how your child feels about their identity. Find out as much as you can about your child’s background, and culture, and encourage them to talk openly about this part of who they are. Confusion or questions about who we are come up for most of us at some time in our lives. Appreciating your child’s identity and positively tackling issues as they come up will help your child understand that they should acknowledge and be proud of who they are.”

Avoiding telling because you want to save your child from hurt is not right. Actually adopted children can feel positive about being adopted. **Jada**, 17 from Jiangsu Province, China: “A pro to being adopted is that you are different and that makes you unique. I think it’s incredible to have something that not everyone has in the world.”



Mira, 14 in a Pactadopt interview when asked how she feels about her adoption replied: “I feel upset that my birth mother gave me up . . . just a little bit . . . but I’m mainly happy ‘coz I probably would not have had a good childhood.”

To find out more, Google ‘YouTube video Adoptees Speak by Pactadopt’ to get a rounded perspective of adoptees views.

Find out as much as you can about your child’s background, and culture, and encourage them to talk openly about this part of who they are.

Familylives.org.uk

Should I go for an open or closed adoption?

There's currently no legal requirement in the UK for adoptive families to maintain contact of any kind with their child's birth family. It's a matter of choice for both the adopting and birth parents.

When a child turns 18 (16 in Scotland) they can see their birth certificate which shows their birth mother's name. With this and information from the adoption agency they can try to find their birth mother and family members.

'Open' just means that the birth parents and the adoptive family have contact – anything from periodic photos or letters to phone calls, emails or visits. No two open adoptions are alike and this relationship can be whatever both parties want it to be.

Closed adoption is usually only chosen when contact is deemed harmful for the child and <15% of adoptions are closed.

'Letterbox contact' is common. The adoptive and birth family exchange a letter or card and photos every year. Adoptive families normally send details of the child's health, achievements and progress at school, while birth relatives tend to write about events in their lives. Correspondence is monitored by the adoption agency or local authority who ensure no contact details are revealed and inappropriate content is removed. This is an adult-to-adult correspondence – adopters choose whether to reply or share it with their child.

If you opt for a closed or semi-closed arrangement like Letterbox, at some point your child will be naturally curious about their genetic parents. It can be better to attempt to have a relationship from the outset to avoid mysteries, worries, fantasies and other false expectations or anxieties. Also, children might want to know more, but be holding their questions back to protect their adoptive parent from hurt.

There is a fair amount of research available on the internet suggesting that children in open adoptions have better psychosocial outcomes than those in semi-open and closed adoptions.

Of course, in many cases contact is not easy.

Adoption UK: "When done in a safe, careful and supported way, contact can have a positive impact on the adopted child and help them to understand their past and their identity better. Contact can be joyful, challenging, confusing, emotional, frustrating and overwhelming – quite possibly many of these things at once. It can be especially complicated for the three quarters of adopted children who have suffered significant violence, abuse or neglect in their birth families. Adoptees will need a lot of support and guidance in managing contact and the feelings that may arise as a result of it".

Adoption UK research showed that, while the majority of adoptive families (84%) had contact arrangements in place, 49% said contact created difficulties or challenges for their child. This does not mean that contact should be avoided, instead it highlights that getting the right support is absolutely vital. For many children this will involve therapy.

Social media has major implications for contact. Young people can trace their birth families more easily and birth families can also make contact. Adoption UK research showed that 24% of survey respondents' children experienced direct birth family contact outside of a formal agreement, mostly via social media.

Contact can be joyful, challenging, confusing, emotional, frustrating and overwhelming – quite possibly many of these things at once.

Adoption UK

Parents should prepare their child for unsolicited contact rather than hoping it can be avoided. Adoption UK: "Open and honest conversations about birth family and the child's history are important, as is making sure adoptees feel supported in their decisions regarding contact, so they don't try to manage it all by themselves."

Where siblings can't be placed together adoptees often have direct contact with their siblings adopted by other families.

Carl, has two adopted children with husband James: "If your instinct is to keep their birth family out of your child's life – make sure you aren't falling into these traps:

- Personal insecurity – wanting your child to only think of you as their dad /mom. You will be doing the parenting; talking to your child about their birth parents and encouraging them to feel as positive as possible about them won't take anything away from what they think and feel about you. But keeping information from them suggests there is something sinister about their birth parents, which could project shame onto the child.



- Wanting to avoid telling your child their birth story – worrying the information about their birth parents might make them sad, embarrassed or some other uncomfortable emotion. It must be incredibly tough to know that your birth parent has a drug dependence, or is in prison, or that they live in very different circumstances to your home. But honesty and openness from our parents is a necessity – and this comes with having difficult conversations and supporting our children through the tough stuff.
- Wanting to protect them – from being disappointed or hurt by their birth parents. Weigh up your child having no relationship with their birth parents versus a complicated one in which you support them through any disappointments, hurt and confusion. The majority of children in the care system are there due to abuse or neglect, or both. Talking to your social worker will help you decide the best course of action in complicated situations."

Put yourself in your child's shoes – and in every decision think about what you would want if you were them. Talk to professionals with experience. And only then decide what you believe is in your child's best interests.

How to build a good relationship with the birth mother?

Birth mothers vary enormously. Many parents tell us positive stories about birth mothers.

Susan has this advice: "The first meeting with a birth mom can be awkward, if you can, go to a public place. Being able to focus on food can help with silences."

The happiest day in the adopting mom's life is the hardest day for the birth mom. Adoption is born from loss.

Lisa

Lisa, adoptive mother of three, is very empathetic towards birth mothers: "The happiest day in the adopting mom's life is the hardest day for the birth mom. Adoption is born from loss. If you have an open relationship with your child's birth mom, it's good to be aware of this – being sensitive to their needs and what they are going through".

"You've got to work hard to maintain the relationships – and some take more work than others. As your children get older it's good to encourage them to be the ones to take responsibility for keeping in touch." Lisa has never missed a Mother's Day or Christmas; she invites their birth mothers to all special occasions and ensures regular calls.

Lisa established an open relationship from the outset: "It's best if your child has always known they are adopted, with no 'reveal' moment. Similarly, it's helpful if they know their birth parents from the start. The last thing an adopting parent wants to set up is a surprise relationship after their child's identity has been formed."

"The relationship most people have with their aunts and uncles – that's similar to the relationship my children have with their birth parents. The best divorces are those where the parents cooperate and support each other. Adopting is not co-parenting, but birth family is important. That includes birth fathers and grandparents and siblings."

Lisa gives a lovely example of how a good relationship can be a real asset: "A couple of years ago, Emma and I were having a typical teenage / parent argument. She came out with the classic 'You're not my mother'. To which I responded, 'You know what, let's give her a call and see what she has to say'. And her birth mom was incredibly supportive, and the best thing is I knew she'd have my back."

Susan: "It's a really good idea to have a post adoption contact agreement clearly defining the minimum amount of contact that is expected. Obviously every situation is different and where the child has been taken from the birth parents it can be fraught. You have to work extremely hard at these relationships. And it is so important that, never mind how tempted you are, you must try and be positive about your child's birth parents. No negative talk about them, emphasise the positive."

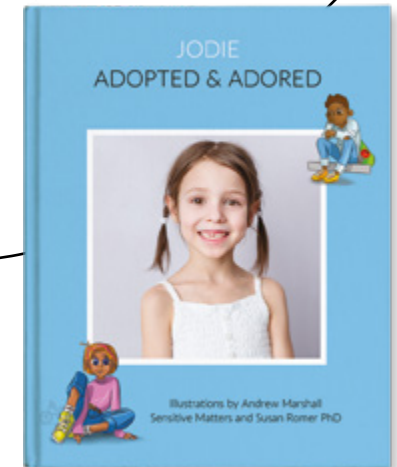
It is so important that, never mind how tempted you are, you must try and be positive about your child's birth parents. No negative talk about them, emphasise the positive.

Susan

sensitive
matters

Helping find the right words

Adopted & Adored
5-8 years – encourage questions about their fostering or adoption



"Easy to use and very good customer service. Very happy with the finished product. It's great to be able to tell our son about our family journey rather than having to use a generic story." **Peter**

There are default story versions for:

- Hetero, same sex and single parent families
- Open or closed adoptions
- From birth, foster care or international

sensitivematters.net

What should I consider when adopting a child of a different culture?

Verywellfamily.com: “Historically the approach in transracial adoptions to teach kids about race was to raise them to be colourblind, with parents and experts alike assuming that a child being of a different race than their parents didn't have to be an issue unless the parents made it one. We now know how faulty that line of thinking is. Not only because it is impossible to be truly colourblind in a multi-racial world, but also because racial minorities don't have the ability to simply ignore their own racial differences. They face discrimination and unique experiences because of those differences that other racial groups may be able to empathize with but will never be able to fully understand.”

Racial prejudice for any minority group is so prevalent you can safely assume that your child will experience it. Prepare them just like you will teach them to safely cross a road.”

Verywellfamily.com



Children raised in homes where their racial identity doesn't match the rest of the family:

- May feel isolated, adrift between their 'home' and 'birth' race and culture, not feeling a true belonging to either. **Marci**, 18 years old, adopted from Jiangxi Province, China: “A good thing [about international adoption] is spanning two cultures. You are able to understand and learn about two world views, two perspectives, two cultures. You get to learn about their history, their food... But the downside of this is you're really not a part of one. I'm not Chinese but I'm not fully American.”
- May have different personal care needs, with hair and skin care being the most obvious.
- May face discrimination, name calling and even, in the extreme, racial hatred.

It is important for the family to learn about their child's culture and where possible find relevant networks. In the case of international adoptions, trips are important. Embrace and celebrate the history and culture from which they come.

Be aware of the difficulties adoptees may face and watch out for signs that they may be experiencing things they ought to talk about and possibly need help tackling. Talk to families that have travelled this path before and learn from them.

Karen Valby has two adopted children, one Ethiopian and one African American: “Don't fall into the trap of worrying that by warning your child about concepts of racism you are making them look for it, possibly when it isn't even really there. Racial prejudice for any minority group is so prevalent you can safely assume that your child will experience it. Prepare them just like you will teach them to safely cross a road.”



Angela Braniff and family

Trayvon, 16 years old: “I'm with my mother Jana. She's a single mother to me and we're an interracial family. I've been with her about three years now. When you see an African American that's big with this middle age, like 54-year-old, 5'4 Caucasian lady, and if you don't know who we really are, then you're just gonna think that I'm trying to take something from her.”

An upside of interracial adoption is these children may grow up with a greater understanding of diversity, embracing diversity in all aspects of their life.

Angela Braniff, @thisgatherednest, is the mom of 8 adopted and biological children: “Adopting transracially or cross culturally shouldn't be taken lightly. Many agencies and adoption professionals are becoming better educated on this facet of adoption, but as adoptive parents it's imperative we get really honest with ourselves and tackle this with open hearts and minds.

Once the baby is home or the airport homecoming party is over, there will be real issues that you and your child will have to face together. There are so many children in need of loving families and it's naive to believe that all can be/or should be adopted by families who share their skin colour or cultural heritage. There is so much beauty that can be found in diversity, but we also have to be prepared for what is almost certain to come our way as adoptive parents, and what will come our child's way as they navigate life being transracially adopted.

You and your child will automatically be seen as 'not really family' by people you encounter throughout life. Strangers will ask in front of your child if 'they're really yours?', 'how much they cost?', 'are they really brothers/sisters?' etc. It may sting for you, but for your child it will burn to have their place in the family called into question at the grocery store or the playground.

There will be looks, stares, questions, and you may even be stopped by people that accuse you of wrongdoing. There are so many people working tirelessly to educate - but there is such a long way to go. Be sure you are up to the task of battling this day in and day out, and that you feel ready to ask hard questions and call out problematic people and situations in your life for the sake of your child.

While you may feel totally ready for this, don't gloss over how your family, friends, and community will handle it. Adoption in general, but more often than not, transracial adoption will expose threads of discrimination and even racism that have been hiding waiting to be excavated in your family for years or generations. Talk to the people who will be in your child's life, ask how they really feel. You may not like what you hear, but at least you can decide from there if that is someone you are willing to cut from your life for the sake of your child. Maybe this all sounds dramatic to you, but after years in the world of adoption, I've learned that these issues are very real, and it's better to address them head on.”

What challenges will I face adopting as a single parent?

www.coramadoption.ork.uk: "There is nothing unusual about single parenting – around a quarter of households in the UK with dependent children are headed by a single parent.

All parents need support and if you are single, you will need other people. You will also need to feel comfortable asking for help. Without support everyday tasks like shopping, let alone an evening or weekend break, may be hard to manage. Family and friends that support your decision to parent alone, and are willing to be involved, will be invaluable.

As a single parent, having sole financial responsibility for a child can feel daunting. Although you don't need to be wealthy to adopt, you will need to be financially stable and able to support yourself and your child or children.

Most single parents need to work, so consider how family-friendly your employer is and, realistically, how compatible your current career is with single parenting. You will need to take time off when a child first comes to live with you, and you may be entitled to adoption leave and pay. Check what your employer's scheme offers.

You may not want to be single forever. But your child will need your undivided attention for several months; it may even take years for them to feel completely secure with you. You will need to consider carefully when and how to introduce your child to a new relationship and how to teach a new partner about adoption and how to support your child's needs."

The advantages of adopting as a single parent include: "Not having to negotiate or consult with a partner meaning you can parent and do your best for your child the way that you want to. Plus your child will also

not be competing for your attention with anyone else. You may build a very special 1:1 relationship, and for some children a single adopter is preferred for this reason. Research shows that children adopted by single adopters do just as well as other adopted children emotionally and in other outcomes."

Do single parents have a harder time getting selected?

Susan: "I've found that many birth moms have been raised by single moms themselves. Many feel comfortable choosing a single mom because of their own experience, however knowing the hardships, they may prefer a married couple. And it can be harder for a single man to be chosen."

Lisa, single mom of three: "I don't think me being a single mom was an issue for any of my kid's birth moms. Actually, Emma's birth parents felt that an open relationship, which was a showstopper for them, would be easier with a single mother than a couple."

Research shows that children adopted by single adopters do just as well as other adopted children emotionally and in other outcomes.

Coram Adoption

Do gay parents face extra challenges adopting?

Lynne Elvins and her partner Emma were the first openly gay couple to adopt in Bristol. In a TED Talk she makes a great point: "We skipped off to our workshop [to learn all about adopting] and we walked into a room with people who had already been through the very long, difficult and exhausting journey of having fertility treatment without success. Those people were at the end of a road and for them adoption can be a last choice. But gay adopters often choose adoption as their first choice. Because of that we come with a more positive set of expectations at the beginning." This can be appealing to birth parents.

Lynne goes on to say: "At the Approval Panel we were asked: Boys especially need dads. If you adopt a boy, how will you provide the support dads do? This is a very good and important question. My answer had 2 parts. Firstly, it depends on what you mean by 'what dads do'. If you mean who will take the child down to the park on a Saturday afternoon and kick a ball around? Who will fix a puncture on a bicycle? My answer to that is: 'We will'. Emma and I will do those things. Women can do dad things. In exactly the same way, men can do mum things.

But what we can't do. And what we don't pretend to be able to do, is to provide a male perspective on things... on shaving, on having your voice break, on what it's like to communicate with other men when women aren't around. But in those situations, we call upon the fantastic circle of men we have in our friends and family. They advise us on what we might do and they also spend time with our son."

If adopting from the care system, it is really helpful if foster parents and social workers help prepare a child for adoption by a gay couple, as was the case for Lynne. "They prepared Stephen by saying to him that he was such a special little boy, he was not just

going to get one mum, he was going to get two! This was incredibly positive for Stephen at that very difficult time when you are transitioning."

Carl and James worried about whether they would be chosen: "It turns out two men are a popular choice for many birth mothers because they are the only mother figure in the child's life."

It's important for gay adopters to find role models that are the same gender as their children. "I'd ask our kids: 'What do you think your friends do with their moms?' and we would make sure ours had these experiences too. Either we would do it with them, or we would find a friend, or they would do whatever it was with Grandma. Whether it's ear piercing, shopping for bras or advice that's needed, we find the best person."

Lynne Elvins



Should I tell friends and family our child's adoption story?

Susan: "Be open with friends and family about your adoption plans – no secrets. Also, they might know a pregnant woman looking for a family – if there's a connection, you might make a match on your own – I've come across this so many times over the years."

People will ask questions, most likely with the best of intentions, they will want to know why your child's birth mother placed them for adoption. Should you be sharing this information?

And from strangers it's not always questions, sometimes it's just idle observations – she's got your hair / your eyes . . . Should you respond with openness? Or in the case of interracial adoptions, unbelievably, people will ask straight out, 'Is she adopted?'.

There are no right or wrong things to say in these situations. Your family has to decide what you think is best. But ask advice from social workers and those with experience.

Angela: "You don't know in the beginning how important protecting your child's story will become. And sometimes people will be insulted that you won't share the information with them. And you will have to be able to defend that decision."

It takes practice, navigating such conversations without causing offence, whilst remaining protective of your child and your family.

You will need to prepare your child. They will get questions too; in the playground and from well-meaning adults.

Jacob, 15 years old: "When people at school ask me about why I don't look like my parents I tell them I'm adopted . . . and they ask more questions. And it just feels really awkward. Trying to explain when they ask, 'Do you know your birth mother?' or 'Have you ever met any of your siblings?'. It's uncomfortable." It's really private information he's being asked to share.

A question like 'Where are you from?' can be loaded for an adoptee. **Cosette,** 19 adopted from Zhanjiang Province China when she was 14 months old: "People don't know what it feels like to be asked these questions. I never know how to answer that. 'Oh, I'm from Dallas, Texas' or 'Oh, I'm from China'. I just don't know and that's like a heartache."

So, when your child is old enough (and this may be sooner than you think or would choose – be on the lookout), talk to them so they too are prepared for the questions and comments.

Angela: "You will also need to model for your child how to respond to those questions with some grace and kindness, but also very firmly, modelling for them what it looks like to protect their own story. Show them they don't have to answer questions about their past for strangers or family members or anyone."

Show them they don't have to answer questions about their past for strangers or family members or anyone

Angela

Will love be enough?

It's a known fact that many adopted children have unique needs, whether that's learning difficulties, developmental delays or attachment disorders. These can be due to genetic factors or attributable to nurture (specifically a lack of nurture) where children experienced difficult circumstances prior to their adoption.

Adopting parents need to anticipate some additional challenges. They need to be on the lookout for signs their children are struggling and not be shy to seek appropriate help – be this extra tuition, more time in exams, counselling or medical support.

We all want to hear that, "Yes, love will surmount all obstacles". But **Angela** gives great advice: "Love is not always enough, and I know that that sounds really harsh. I think that a lot of times we go into relationships with other people believing that if we just love them enough, we can fix them, we can heal them. But there are some situations, some traumas that love just isn't enough to cover. You need counselling, you need therapy, you need help – resources beyond

just your love as a parent for this child. And that's OK. It doesn't make you a failure as an adoptive parent. Always keep in mind that these children in so many cases have been through things and experiences, traumas, that most of us can't wrap our heads around . . . and so it's not their fault either. Go into it with an open heart and mind, knowing that you're going to do the best you can with the resources that you have, and then understand that if it's not enough and you need professional help, that it is out there. There's no shame in getting that help for yourself or for your child. The kind of platitudes that make us feel better just aren't always true, especially when it comes to adoption and healing wounds."

Adopted children have been through trauma, even those adopted at birth have been through the trauma of separation from their birth mother. And if adoption isn't your first-choice route to build your family, then you have been through loss too. Seek counselling for yourself and for your child too when the time is right.

We go into relationships with other people believing that if we just love them enough, we can fix them, we can heal them. But there are some situations, some traumas that love just isn't enough to cover.

Angela



Where can I find help and support?

Websites:

www.adoptivefamilies.com

www.adoptionuk.org

www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/after-adoption-what-help-can-we-get/

www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/your-adopted-childs-health-needs/

Angela Braniff has a wonderful free adoption guide – you can request a copy from the link in her YouTube video '5 Things I Wish I Knew Before I Adopted A Child'.

Children's books that help with telling:

Our Adopted & Adored books, with story versions for traditional, same sex and single families, with open or closed adoptions are completely editable – you can change all of the text so it truly is YOUR family story. You can add your family photos, modify the clipart illustrations and even change the colour of the pages.

There are several other options of more generic books that aren't customizable. A quick search on Amazon will bring up several of these.

Instagram accounts we love:

@pactadopt

@adoptioncircle

@adoptionnetworkuklawcenter

@brilliantbeginnings

@bighappyfamilyofficial

@purladoptions

@adoptionagencies

@encouragefostercare

Good hashtags to follow:

#adoptionjourney

#adoptionrocks

#adoptionislove

#happyadoptionday

#adoptionislove

#adoptionstory

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Helping find the right words

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