

OUR STORIES

A COLLECTION OF EARLY PERMANENCE CARERS EXPERIENCES



What made you decide to accept an FFA placement?

I came into this only wanting to do FFA and not traditional adoption for the reason of it benefitting the child hugely and benefitting us too from having been potentially the only carer they would ever have lived with.

We wanted to make an early difference to a child's life. We knew research suggested early placement could help the child to form early positive attachments and this could have a greater impact on their mental and physical health as they grow.

We had long hoped to start a family. We had always been interested in fostering and adopting so this felt the right path for us to take.

We started our journey wanting to adopt a little girl anything from 1 year up to around 4 years old. We didn't really think FFA was for us due to the emotional risk there could be to our family. After going through all the wonderful benefits of having a boy with our social worker, we slowly started to imagine what it would be like to have a boy and our birth daughter and grew fond of the idea. We started to look at younger babies and could see all the benefits to having all the firsts with that baby.

Doing FFA was the best thing we could have done, and I would highly recommend this to anyone that wants to experience and bond to a baby from birth.

We knew that by doing FFA, we would get a younger child. The downside to this was the risk that the child may go back to their birth family or that the placement order would not be granted. We decided to simply just add our name to the list but would discuss risk in greater detail as/when we were matched with a potential child through FFA.

We have found FFA an overwhelmingly positive experience. Both our children came to us through this route at between 10 -14 weeks old. We wanted to keep our options open and being reassured by the knowledge that our social worker would make us aware of the level of risk involved with each and every potential placement we felt that on balance it was worth being open to FFA as a route.

How did you find the waiting before the child came to you?

Tricky. Friends, family, and work were on constant standby so that if 'the call' happened we could drop everything. Much as if we were expecting a birth child - except we had no due date!

We were expecting to be matched with a newborn, but life sometimes throws you a curveball. Our first call from our social worker was for a one-year-old. Our initial thoughts were 'nope we are all ready for a newborn' - practically and psychologically. Then we agreed to find out more. There were some medical concerns and social complexities that filled us with more doubt. But I am currently typing this cuddled up to her, a few years in, filled with unimaginable love, and wouldn't have it any other way.

We had a rather rocky road from first saying yes to our potential FFA match to bringing her home. The judge was expected to rule for her to be removed from her current situation - a mother and child foster placement, to be with her new foster family (us). We had an introductions plan in place that would start the day after the hearing. So, the day of the hearing proceeded in handing everything over at work, saying my byes. Us having a last dinner 'just the two of us'. And then we heard. The judge had ruled for her to have more time in mother and child placement with her birth mum. 3 weeks later the same thing. Handover at work. Goodbyes and another 'last supper.' But this time someone was off sick. How long could we keep waiting? What if this was now going to be months and months? All the time not wanting to wish for birth mum to experience the loss of her child? A few long weeks of waiting and stressing and worrying about whether she was experiencing harm. Mixed confusing feelings, anxiety, restlessness. And yes, a few tears. But reader fear not, it worked out. We coped. Our work colleagues coped. She came to us.

We knew the birth mother was expecting our daughter 2 months before and that the baby could come prematurely due to their circumstances. Everything was in place, my adoption leave from work, the milk machine, nursery, nappies were waiting. I got the call at work. We were excited mostly but had some anxieties as birth mother had not engaged in early scans or midwife appointments. There was a risk that our daughter could have been born with a disability or disease. She was healthy at birth. However, she was born with an eye condition that the doctors think is genetic. She attends regular hospital appointments but so far it has not impacted her development.

Within a week of our approval, we had two profiles, one for a 6-week-old baby boy and another for an unborn baby boy due within the week. We didn't realise the speed with FFA and how quick this would chuck us into parenting again. We had limited information on both babies, and it was a very scary and daunting prospect. Both the child's social worker and our social worker did their best to provide us with as much information as they could gather. The 6-week-old baby pulled at our heart strings straight away. Unfortunately, he was abandoned and had no one.

The call that changed our lives came 13th August 2021. I'll be honest in saying we both thought it would take a lot longer!! It was probably the following 7 days that on one hand felt like forever and at the same time flew by. We knew our little girl needed to be placed quickly, initially we were told 48hrs! It was the most exhausting time in our lives. I think it was just the adrenaline and excitement that kept us going. We had nothing for a 12month old baby!! No cot, car seat, clothes etc because we didn't know what age/sex of child we would be matched with, so we literally sat on Amazon ordering everything we could possibly think of.

The wait, especially for our first child was not easy and we had court dates re-scheduled a couple of times so there were delays. At the time it was really hard as we had craved being a family for some time but with difficulties becoming pregnant had turned to adoption. We were ready and it was so frustrating to have to head back to work having been primed for the big arrival!

How were those first few days and weeks?

Meeting our daughter for the first time on the neonatal unit was magical and emotional. I remember asking if we could take pictures. We treasure those pictures now and it gives us a visual narrative when talking to our daughter about our first meeting. The first few weeks were like a dream come true; we were tired like any new parents, but we were elated.

Both harder and easier than expected. Harder: We didn't expect the foster carers she was with before moving in with us to be quite so tricky. Luckily, the ACE team stepped in and smoothed it over and all was well. The foster carers had a very different parenting style to us though - very 'old school' and that was tough to see. The child's social worker also had some very outdated parenting and adoption views. It was very tricky to try to gain confidence in being a new parent and getting to know our new child with that subtle undermining. Our ACE social worker stepped in where she could and smoothed things over somewhat but to be honest, we just started telling the child's social worker what they wanted to hear! Easier: it's not everyone's experience but the love and bonding came quickly for all of us - including extended family. She is a joy.

The first day we met him it was love at first sight, he gave us a few smiles and it felt so natural holding him for the first time. The day we picked him up was very exciting the foster carer was very helpful and gave us a load of information about his routine. We had lots of lovely moments in that first week.

When the social worker turned up with her, we had never been so nervous. We wanted everything to be perfect. Luckily, she bonded straight away with us, and the family dog and she seemed to settle straight in. The next few days/weeks to be honest was a blur. We kept wondering if we were doing it right? We both felt confident around children, but the therapeutic parenting was new to us. She didn't want cuddles or kisses - and all we wanted to do was cuddle her and love her! I wanted to see progress and kept being told it would be baby steps. There was a blur of meetings/emails and social worker visits, which we did not mind at all as it allowed us to tap into their knowledge and get the advice we needed. We also had to complete weekly foster care records which we would have to send to our social worker and the local authority. In some way this reminded us that we were her temporary guardians, rather than her new mummy and daddy.

Once our children arrived with us it was the most wonderful experience and we instantly fell in love with them. It was hard of course and a steep learning curve but to be a family at last and nurture our beautiful children was a joy and those early days and weeks are moments in our lives we will treasure forever.

What was your experience of birth family time contact?

She had already had her goodbye contact with birth family before coming to live with us. We did meet birth family a few months later and got on well with them. They are no risk to us but are not accepting of the adoption. They have been dealt difficult cards in life that meant they lacked the skills needed to be safe parents. We keep in touch monthly via emails and will be pursuing face to face contact between our child and them and other birth family members subject to risk assessments and social services support. Fingers crossed as we think contact will benefit us all.

From week 1 the court had ordered weekly contact with birth family. We handed our daughter to the social workers for 2 hours a week. She went to a contact centre, and I sent her with a little communication book so we could write messages to the birth family about her feeds and nappy changes. This book is in her adoption box now for her to look at whenever she wants. We had mentally prepared ourselves for contact so, although hard, we knew it was important for our daughter and her early life journey. We tried to arrange a face-to-face meeting with the birth parents but unfortunately, they didn't turn up. We regret not asking the social workers to take a photo of birth parents. Something I feel should be part of contact for all foster for adopt children.

Birth parents were not as engaged due to their own personal issues, so we only had one contact visit and then a final goodbye visit. The first one was more upsetting as I didn't know what to expect and it felt strange handing her over to a stranger (social worker). Then on the journey home she screamed and was very distressed, and as I was on my own, I wasn't able to comfort her.

We did get to meet birth mum after the placement order had gone through. It was important to us to meet her, and we both found the experience very positive. We even hugged and cried together, and I have photos, memories, and lots of personal information about birth mum that I can pass on.

Face to face contact occurred for some time following placement, with our first child it was fairly frequent – 3 or 4 times a week for 2 hours – but less so with our second. In the moment it was hard but seeing them again after contact was a wonderful experience and we were re-energised to make the most of the rest of the day.

We have elected to continue annual face to face contact with the birth parents to maintain a relationship should our children ever want to explore their backgrounds. We would wholeheartedly recommend this where it is possible. We remember thinking they might have negative feelings towards us, but this is anything but the truth, they are grateful to us for looking after their birth children and providing them a loving home. To be able to give them a window into their lives is a wonderful thing.

What were the challenges you faced?

The uncertainty is the hardest to manage. Until that adoption order was safely in our hands on paper, we didn't let ourselves fully believe she was 'ours'. Even though it was 99.9% likely way before then.

Dealing with multiple people with differing views on how to parent your new child. And in FFA's case you are fostering so you do have to do it the foster carer way (or at least say you are doing it that way), which is a tension.

Dealing with the guilt of what birth parents are going through. And the doubt that the child's removal was the 'right thing.' Particularly as the social services paperwork was lacking.

Birth parents would not turn up for contact sometimes, which meant some wasted journeys and time. Eventually we had an arrangement where they would need to call to confirm they were coming before we left the house. Another challenge was the wait for the court case to agree the adoption. Birth parents could attend the court case and potentially prove they could look after the child. We were told the risk a long time before. However, the birth parents didn't contest, and the order went through. We were so relieved and excited finally our daughter was officially ours.

We were quite naïve to what a withdrawing baby would go through. Within that first week we noticed little things and made a list of these and over the next few weeks one by one these side effects disappeared. Another thing we have learned is that due to the start that he had, he picked up Bronchiolitis very easily. Within a week of collecting him he had caught this, and it was very concerning. He has since caught it 5 times (roughly monthly) but each time it doesn't affect him as much and only now lasts a couple of days, so it shows his immune system has learned to cope with it.

The challenges were the delays and the not knowing. We had so many 'paper' delays where forms were not completed in time, and this went on for months! We had to move adoption matching panel three times due to delays at the local authority with their paperwork and this was very frustrating! We felt powerless.

It was a challenge to trust everyone around you. We were convinced on several occasions that (child) would go back to her birth family. It was hard to trust the process.

It was hard to give our hearts fully, knowing it could be broken at any time. We had to throw ourselves in to loving her, which was hard to do. It was a 'tug of war' between our brain and heart. This did get easier as the process progressed.

What were the positives you found?

She is all we could have imagined and more. She has some behavioural challenges but maybe not much more than a typical toddler. She loves us so much and we love her. Our house is filled with laughter (and screams and tantrums - but let's focus on the laughter if we're looking at the positives). In the thick of the waiting and the early days of all getting to know each other and feeling under the microscope it was stressful, very stressful at times, but it does pass and really is such a short period in the grand scheme of things (easy to say that now I know). Would we go back and do it again? Yes! Are we going to do it again? Heck no! Two are enough for us!

Raising a small baby from birth, cherishing all those special milestones. Giving them lots of affection by offering our feel-good hormones through love, attention and cuddles. The face-to-face training meant we formed a friendship group. We've just come back from a holiday with some adoption friends from the group. Both our children talked about their adoption journey during that time. It cemented their place in the world.

The support we had from everyone, especially in those first few months. We were able to access 1:1 weekly therapeutic parenting support session. I found this so useful, and it gave me heaps of confidence that how we were parenting was definitely on the right track!

We got to be parents to a very young baby, very quickly.

In our mind FFA is a great route to adoption and bringing loving families together as early as is possible. Each case will be unique and come with its own risk but be reassured that your social worker will make you fully aware of this. For us it was a risk worth taking and we have no regrets and are so grateful that it enabled us to welcome our children into our family at such an early stage.

What advice or tips would you have for others thinking about FFA?

Be open minded about the process but listen to your gut. Really think about what you would be comfortable with. The child's story will involve some level of trauma, what level are you comfortable with?

Ask questions, have they siblings? What is the family health, education history? Are there any risks? Are you comfortable with those risks? Ask for photos to be taken of birth family for the child's life story work.

Enjoy the high points because it's a wonderful rollercoaster of love, emotion and challenges. Our daughter is 4 years old now and starts school this year, she is thriving and full of beans, she embraces all life has to offer.

Don't be put off by the uncertainties. Traditional adoption also has its uncertainties. Becoming a parent, the traditional way also has its uncertainties. Life is filled with uncertainties. Feel the fear and do it anyway!

Ask your social worker as many questions as you need. It helped us the more informed we were as we knew ahead of time what meetings and paperwork were expected.

I recognised that I developed post adoption depression, not as expected after our child moved in, but months later after the adoption order came through. All those months of uncertainty and seemingly jumping through hoops had been stressful but I hadn't been depressed. When the relief of it going through hit my mood dropped. Watch out for that!

As with traditional adoption don't underestimate the emotional toll that this will take. Suddenly you are being triggered by random things that you didn't know you'd be triggered by, all sorts of childhood memories come back, you're exhausted, and you hear your parents words come out of your own mouth whether you want them to or not, and your ability to stay calm under pressure is infinitely tested. On top of that in adoption you have to fight the weird complicated and conflicting feelings that your new child has a birth family. And they might be in your thoughts way more than you expected. I felt a really strong guilt. And worried about them a lot. So then on top of that in FFA you are dealing with birth family contact so that guilt and maybe irritation at the birth family might be there too. And the imposter syndrome is real. You are not mum/dad (yet). You are foster carer. That is tricky. And you might stay foster carer. Your child might not be your child after all. They might return to birth family. Which would be heart breaking for you. But maybe you'd find comfort in knowing that a team of professionals had deemed it in the child's best interest and your forever child is still out there yet to meet you.

I couldn't escape the benefits to a child of minimal moves. Of potentially you are being their only foster carer, their only parent that they ever lived with. With FFA you get some benefits financially too. And potentially a quicker match.

Worrying about a baby is perfectly normal and whether they are birth children or adoptive children the feeling is exactly the same.

Definitely do your research about substance withdrawal, not because there is anything to be concerned about, but to help reassure you as parents that these things are perfectly normal and by tracking them you can see the positive progress.

Go in with an open mind, keep your options open. You don't have to say yes to the FFA placement if it doesn't feel right.

Try and be prepared as much as possible. Your home will never be the same. We thought we had loads of space until we didn't! Read lots of books and do your own research.

Keep an open mind about the child's birth family. Think about how they are feeling, what questions they may have. Gather as much information about them as you can, take photos if they are at contact and if you get to meet them.