

# OUR STORIES

A COLLECTION OF EARLY PERMANENCE  
CARER EXPERIENCES



**CCS Adoption**

Building a positive future for children

# INTRODUCTION

Since 2013 CCS Adoption has been committed to the development of early permanence. In 2018 our high standards of practice were recognised when CCS became the first Adoption Agency in the Country to be awarded the Early Permanence Quality Mark. As a leading adoption agency in this area we are keen to develop and promote the adopter voice in early permanence, as well as produce resources that will help other prospective EP carers explore whether this is a journey they think they could embark on.

Over the years I have been privileged to be alongside numerous EP journeys, from the decisions and discussions in assessment, to preparation training, through panel approval and then onto the roller coaster of placement and beyond. No two experiences are the same and however hard we try on the preparation training to communicate this message, we can never fully get across the diversity of experiences and twists and turns that an EP journey can take.

I am also aware from setting up and coordinating various EP support mechanisms, how much people can benefit from telling their stories, having them heard and feeling they are contributing to the on-going learning around EP. EP carers, like so many adopters are often particularly committed to try to help others thinking of embarking on a similar journey or struggling in the middle of it.

It was therefore with the above in mind that I set about compiling a book of anonymised EP carer experiences, told in EP carers own words and covering the things that mattered to those who were telling the stories. Whilst these stories have been anonymised, no other details have been changed.

I am extremely grateful to all those who have contributed their stories to this book. For many of you I know it has not been easy to relive parts of the journey, and for all of you it would have been a challenge to find the time in your busy lives. So thank you. By contributing to this book you have helped create a resource that will assist prospective adopters consider whether or not offering EP is something they can do. If they decide they can offer EP your stories also help prepare them for their own unique EP journey, whilst helping them to feel less alone.

It is envisaged that further editions of this book will be produced over time including more EP journeys. So if you have an EP story you want to tell please contact me at [lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org](mailto:lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org) Tel. 0117 935 0005. I would also welcome any feedback about whether these stories have helped you make your EP decisions or survive your EP journeys.

Lastly just as the text is anonymised, none of the images relate to any of the actual people in the stories, but are freely available stock images designed to break up the text and make the resource more readable.

Lindy Wootton,  
Early Permanence Project Manager

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# OUR EARLY PERMANENCE STORY

*"We became more and more convinced that EP was the right path for us to take"*

## Deciding to offer EP

The reasons for considering and ultimately choosing to consider EP are rooted in the adoption of our first child. We adopted our first child through the traditional adoption route in 2010. She was two and a half and we were home number five. She had experienced neglect, physical and emotional abuse before coming to us and she suffered trauma from the constant moves. Our daughter has attachment disorder, sensory processing disorders and has social and emotional difficulties due to her difficult early start. Having said this, we are keen to stress that being her parents is an honour and a privilege every day and that we feel unbelievably lucky to have her as our daughter. The progress we have watched her make over the 8 years we have been her parents is unbelievable and we have so much joy from having her in our life.

However, it was clear that our experiences in parenting our daughter were a key element in guiding both my husband and myself towards offering an early permanence placement. Firstly, we had of course decided we wanted to expand our family and felt it was the right time for our daughter. Secondly, we knew first-hand the impact that multiple moves and separations have had upon our first child. We wanted to minimise this for another child, even if they didn't end up staying with us, which we could do through offering an EP placement. We hoped if they did stay, that some of the difficulties our daughter experienced through her difficult early childhood would at least be minimised, if not removed. Thirdly, we felt that although losing a child placed

with us would be traumatic, we were already parents and so might find it easier than if we were childless, as we would still be parents whatever happened. Finally, we felt EP offered us the chance to parent a baby and this was something we wanted the opportunity to experience.

## Assessment and preparation training

The assessment period seemed to go smoothly and quickly – much more quickly than our experiences in 2009-10. We built up a friendly relationship with our social worker and felt that this enabled her to get to know us and to understand our strengths, our weaknesses, our support networks and what we were hoping for to complete our family. Our social worker was a constant source of support and information throughout the experience.

We took part in several days of face to face training, including training on EP. We already knew others who had experienced EP placements, some of these in which children had been returned to the birth family. We found it useful to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of EP and again, it brought it home to us that for the child, it was a win-win situation in difficult circumstances. We found it really useful to meet a current EP carer during the training, who brought her young foster son and discussed the journey so far and living with the uncertainty. The experiences and the information led to much discussion between my husband and I, and we became more and more convinced that EP was the right path for us to take.

## Waiting for a placement

Once we had been approved by panel, the waiting game began. We prepared the room in advance to some extent, to prepare our daughter. We placed a cot in the room, explaining that hopefully soon we would be fostering a baby and that they would need somewhere to sleep. It was important to us that our daughter was prepared for an arrival beforehand, as we knew we would only get a limited amount of notice of a placement. We had ensured that the concept of EP had been explained to close family members, who supported our decision with reservations as they worried about the emotional pain we would experience if the child did not remain with us.

During this time we received emails sharing brief details of children and we were asked if we wished to be considered or given more information. Over a period of about six months, we declined interest in many children. This felt difficult, as it had in 2010 when searching for our daughter. But as then, we knew it was important to find the child that fitted our family and its needs, so that we could ensure that we were the best fit for the child's needs too.

There were also children in whom we expressed more interest, only to wait in tantalising silence and then hear nothing, or learn that they had been placed with another family. This was frustrating, but being a great believer in fate, we felt that the right child would come at the right time.



# OUR EARLY PERMANENCE STORY

*"We had the opportunity for cuddles, kisses and play and to take him out in his buggy."*

## The placement

The right child did indeed come at the right time. I had finished teaching for the year and half way through the summer holidays, we had an email explaining that a 3 month old boy was looking for a home from the start of September. It explained that the birth mother had died a few weeks after his birth, that no family on the birth mother's side was able to step forward to care for him and that they were currently establishing paternity. Both my husband and I were moved by the story and wanted to know more information. I can honestly say we felt in our gut that this was the child for us. Over the next week, more questions were asked and answered by both our social worker and the social worker and family finder for the child. Within a week, we were all meeting at our house to discuss what was known so far and what the next steps would be. There was a great degree of uncertainty about how many people would need to be assessed for the child, depending upon the

child's paternity. We were aware that depending on the identity of the father, potentially several siblings or grandparents could step forward to be assessed if the birth father was unable to care for the boy. However, we still felt that in the circumstances, he needed a home, he could not remain where he was past the end of August and we felt that we could really help him at this time, regardless of whether or not he became our son. We were incredibly excited and happy and hopeful at this time that this could be the right child for us. At the same time, we were apprehensive and nervous about the upcoming months and about potentially losing the child. Additionally, we felt some guilt, because for us to become his parents, it would mean we were wishing failure for his birth family and to wish someone failure felt awkward. Having said this, we knew it was not our decision to make and that ultimately, any decision would be made in the best interests of the child.

## Contact

We had two days of contact with the little boy before bringing him home. The foster carer was a delightful lady who was a mother of four children aged between 10 and 16. She had cared for the child since his mother had passed away 5 weeks after his birth, along with his 16 year old half-sister. (The half-sister was now living with her father). She was keen to discuss his routines with us, to ensure we knew how to sterilise bottles correctly and how to help him settle to sleep. She shared information she knew about the baby and how she had been present on the day his mother died. Having the opportunity to hear these stories was so useful and we knew would be very valuable for the child one day. His practical needs and wants were also clearly identified. We had the opportunity for cuddles, kisses and play and to take him out in his buggy. Our daughter was very much involved in this process and enjoyed getting to know her new foster brother. We made it clear that we were not



'Mummy and Daddy' to the little boy, but would be called by our first names.

On the second day we also met with his health visitor, who carried out the weight and health check, discussed his needs with us and arranged to transfer all his details to our local health visitor service, which she promptly did that day. The foster carer went through the child's wardrobe with me, clearing out any old and outgrown clothes and then we packed the suitcase together, gathering toys and other belongings. The following morning we arrived and after half an hour were on our way again, waved off by the social workers. We brought him home and began the process of settling him in. We stayed in touch with the foster carer, letting her know initially on a daily basis how he was doing and then lessening this as time went on.



# OUR EARLY PERMANENCE STORY

*“During this time he was known to all: as our foster son.”*

## Challenges and delights

The delight from the beginning would be in getting to know and developing an ever deepening bond with the most gorgeous, adorable little boy. He had the most cheeky, engaging personality, slept well, drank well and was an absolute joy to be with. It was a pleasure to play with him, to introduce him to family and friends, to cuddle and kiss him, bath him, sing to him, rock him to sleep and take him to Rhyme time, swimming and all sorts of new experiences. Feeling love for this child was not difficult at all.

Of course, we knew that he might not become ours and that remained a constant worry throughout this time of joy. We never held back from showing him love and affection though, reasoning that the damage from distant and remote parenting would far outweigh any grief we had from losing him. We firmly believed that he deserved the best we could give him, regardless of whether or not he became our son.

We also ensured that during this time he was known to all as our foster son. Close family and friends knew we hoped to adopt him and

understood the nature of early permanence, others knew that we were fostering a little boy. For our daughter, it was clear we were fostering him at all times.

During the autumn, paternity of the child was established and the assessment of his birth father took place. This required me to drive the child 40mins – 1 hour twice a week to a contact centre and then back for 2x 1 hour contact session with the birth father. Due to the nature of allegations that had been made against him by several people, it was deemed better that I did not have direct contact with him. Therefore I remained in one part of the building and the contact workers would take the baby to and from the sessions. The contact had been planned to ensure the baby had a minimum amount of time away from me, his main caregiver. It was well thought out. Emotionally, though it was extremely hard to do this. We were foster carers and paid to be so, but we were adopters emotionally. To sit in a room while a child you want to be yours is carried out of the room to allow someone to bond with him who ultimately could take the child for good, is emotionally draining. I was fortunate to always

have someone with me during the hour of waiting to talk to and to cry with when I needed it.

Early Permanence is often compared to a rollercoaster and that is the challenge of the role. We felt helpless, waiting for decisions to be made and knowing we had no part to play in those decisions. On one hand, we desperately wanted to have that control. On the other, we knew logically that the decision to remove the child from his birth father could not be our decision. We knew we would need to be able to tell the child one day it wasn't our decision, if he became our son. But logic and love didn't sit comfortably together. Logically I knew that when social services paid for the birth father to travel by train to visit his son, paid for hotel accommodation and taxis, they were doing everything they could, as legally required, to facilitate contact. Emotionally though I found it difficult at this time that they were doing so much to help him. One of the hardest requests asked was to send the baby in with appropriate toys for the contact hour. To be asked to facilitate play with the person that ultimately could destroy our family hopes felt devastating. At the same time as hoping with all our hearts that the baby

stayed with us, we felt guilty for wishing failure on someone else. We felt anxious, exhilarated, hopeful, hopeless, devastated, helpless, joyful, tense.... swinging from one extreme to the other. Never relaxed. Often awake at night, worrying. We'd known it would be hard, but not just how hard, until we were in the situation of waiting and hoping. Nothing I can write can adequately describe the miseries of this time, as well as the joy. Two things sustained us. One, we were helping the baby and whatever happened, we would know that we had given him a great start and couldn't have done more for him. Two – we had a choice – we could ring and quit. We chose not to do so, but to carry on. And when we had no other choice in the matter, knowing we chose to continue gave us some sense of control.

# OUR EARLY PERMANENCE STORY

*“We could begin to dare to hope that this wonderful little boy might be ours.”*

Mid autumn, we were told that the baby might need to enter a residential setting with his Birth father. Due to the nature of many allegations of DV, the setting was to be a 24 hour watched setting, with specially trained staff. We were asked if we would be available for the baby if his father did not pass the assessment. For a week, we believed this would happen and this week was our darkest time. We truly believed we would lose him. Our support network was on hand and we needed them. We cried a lot, whilst putting on a brave face around the children when they were awake. We prepared our daughter for this event, discussing holidays with her and looking at water slides. We grieved for his loss, knowing there would be nothing we could do to prevent it.

After a week, it was decided to step up contact instead and the birth father was asked to meet his son 4 days a week, 3 hours a day. Ultimately, this proved too much of a commitment for the

birth father and he went missing for several weeks, uncontactable by letter, phone or email. From deep despair to wild hope, we swung. And ultimately, birth father was unable to commit to the visits.

A delight during this time was also the opportunity to meet with and to develop a relationship with his half-sister and later, with his maternal grandmother. Initially these meetings took place in a contact centre, face-to-face, with a contact worker present. But after a few months, we were allowed to move to ‘Contact in the Community,’ meeting at soft play centres, cafes and local parks. We are honoured to have these family members as part of our extended family. We know for our son, that these relationships we have now built up with the extended family on his birth mother’s side will allow him to remain in contact with part of his birth family and that through them, he can learn more about his birth mother than we could ever have told him. We feel incredibly lucky that we are able

to have this relationship with them and that we are all agreed that the adoption of the baby was in his best interests, as is the decision to embed this part of his birth family as an extended part of our own family.

## **The final decision**

The Placement Order was granted in early December, which meant that for us, Christmas had come early and we could begin to dare to hope that this wonderful little boy might be ours. We felt we could buy him Christmas presents now, knowing he would be with us for Christmas Day. Some of these presents were for his room, which we now began to personalise, with a name plaque on the door, with matching bedding and stars on the ceiling. We still discussed how if he moved from us, he could take these with him. We were aware that until the Adoption Order was granted

and until the appeal period had lapsed, that this possibility remained.

In January, we moved from being his foster carers to being his Adoptive Parents after the Matching Panel and at this time, we moved from calling ourselves by our names to him, to a period of ‘Mummy Laura’ and ‘Daddy Ryan’, before removing our names. All of this was matched with discussions with our daughter, preparing her for the changes, discussing how the baby would now become her brother and ensuring she had plenty of quality time with us both. As she had built up a bond with the little boy, she was over the moon that he would be staying always. In addition to this, discussing the process of Adoption as it happened gave her a deeper awareness of the process of her own life story and led to many questions being asked and answered about her own early experiences.



# OUR EARLY PERMANENCE STORY

*“We continue to see the utter certainty of the win-win for the child and wholeheartedly support EP.”*

## Where we are now

The Adoption Order was granted in April 2018 and our son is now a happy, lively and active 2 year old. He is securely attached to ourselves and is making good progress in his milestones. We are a happy family of four who have now remembered how to relax again and who can look back on this difficult time knowing that for us, it gave us the most beautiful, adorable son.

## Reflections

In Dec 2018 it was two years since our son's Placement Order was granted. We feel incredibly lucky and blessed to have him as part of our life. Having had him at such a young age, we do feel that we have had the opportunity to develop a secure attachment with him and know the value of this, as with our daughter we did not have this opportunity.

The memory of the rollercoaster has faded somewhat, but we do remember how emotionally draining it was to live in such uncertainty and helplessness. But we continue to see the utter certainty of the win-win for the child and for this reason, wholeheartedly support EP.

As part of wanting to support others, I remain actively involved with the STEPs Early Permanence Support Group offered by CCS Adoption. Both during the time of fostering and afterwards, I have continued to speak at Early Permanence Training about my own experiences. I feel that it is so important not to go through

this experience alone, but to seek help from your close support Network and from those who are also going through or have gone through EP. Our social worker was also a great support throughout the EP rollercoaster. Especially important for me was the support I had when attending contact sessions and waiting for the baby (now our son) to be returned to me.

## Advice to others offering or thinking about offering EP

Be clear on your motivations for wanting to offer an EP placement, including what will have been the benefits if the child does not stay with you.

Know – and use – your support network. Seek more support at all times from your friends and family, your social worker and from those who are going through or have experienced EP.

Look for positive contact opportunities where possible and try to learn everything you can during contact that may be of interest to your child when older.





# OUR EP JOURNEY

*“There were some very difficult sessions about what adopted children may have experienced within their birth family”*

## Deciding to offer EP

We chose EP because this would give us the opportunity to experience parenthood from the earliest stages, which is what we really wanted. Our decision to do EP wasn't an easy one but we felt that it would definitely be in the best interests of the child, and this made it seem a positive step, whatever the outcome. We knew we would be devastated if it didn't work out for us, but the 'silver lining' was that the child would have received such a good start in life. Although these things are impossible to predict, we wanted to accept a placement that had the lowest possible risk of the child returning to their birth family, to minimise the chances of us going through such a trauma.

## Assessment and preparation training

This process was fairly short - around 8 months in total - but very intensive. There were times that the social worker asked questions that seemed to have little relevance, but as the process continued we understood exactly why certain issues from our past had to be discussed and understood. If there are any cracks in your family relationships or emotional baggage you're carrying, these need to be fully understood so that the placement is one that has the best 'fit', and the best chance of succeeding. We found the training practical, interesting and well handled. There were some very difficult sessions about what adopted children may have experienced within their birth family, and this can be upsetting. Understandably, the EP-

specific training tended to give a 'worst case' scenario of how the placement could go, and we found this quite daunting at times.

## Waiting for a placement

From approval we only waited a matter of 2 weeks or so before A's profile was emailed to us. It all happened very quickly. He was due in 3 weeks when we were first contacted, but he was born 2 weeks early. This meant in effect we had one day to prepare before picking him up from hospital. It was a huge whirlwind - very exciting and scary at the same time. What helped us the most during this time was having our family on hand to go out and buy all the equipment we needed while we handed over our work. My partner's mum then stayed for a few days to show us the ropes with baby care!





# OUR EP JOURNEY

*"We now have our son and we feel fortunate that he is blissfully unaware of all the goings on that got us to this point"*



## Contact

The birth parents challenged the care order, and were keen to demonstrate their ability to look after A. Contact was agreed at 3x per week, however his birth father dropped off the radar after a couple of visits. His birth mum was very affected by the breakdown of their relationship - which was very volatile - and as such her attendance at contact became sporadic, to the point that contact was then reduced to once a week. We met both of them, although obviously birth mum much more regularly. Birth mum was always civil to us, and I think it was a big bonus that we built some kind of a relationship with her so that when the placement order was made she didn't challenge it, as she told the court she could see that we were nice people and that her baby would have a happy life with us.

## The final decision

From the outset, the baby's social worker explained that it was highly unlikely he would go back to his birth family, as birth mum already had a few other children who had all gone into care - but even so we felt very nervous until everything was agreed. We compiled the court application for

the final adoption order, and then just at the point of submission, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was caught very early and treated successfully, but the application had to go on hold until my treatment finished so that my health assessment could be updated.

Having then expected it to go through smoothly, the court hearing was adjourned because birth mum arrived at the court unannounced and told them she was contesting the adoption order. This wasn't a big surprise as there had been a miscommunication around a contact visit which meant that she had expected to see the baby, although we had been told not to bring him. This had upset her a lot. Finally, one month later, she came to the adjourned hearing and told them she had changed her mind. The adoption order was then granted.

## Where we are now

We now have our son and we feel fortunate that he is blissfully unaware of all the goings on that got us to this point. I have taken part in a life story workshop (run by Sharing Stories) to prepare us

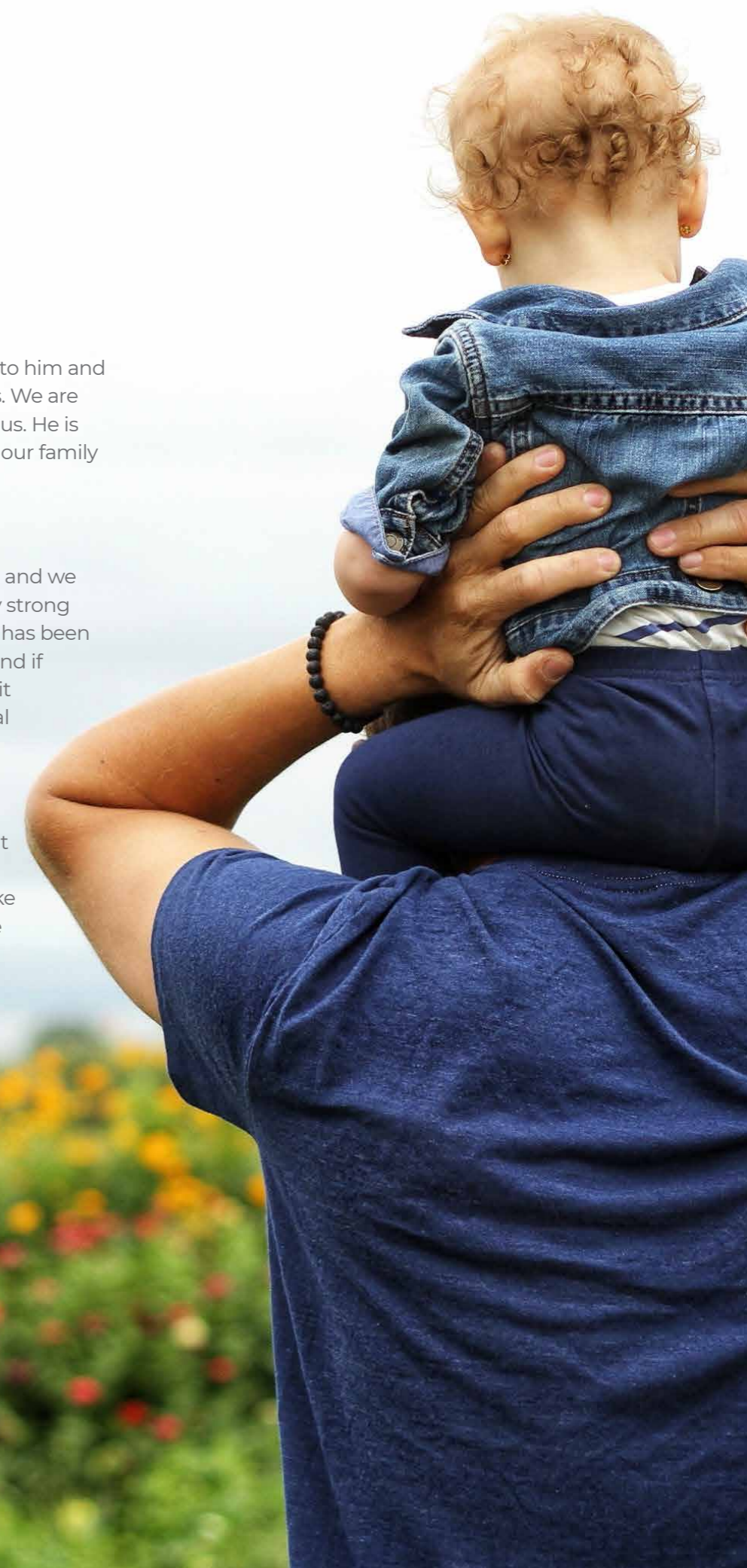
for how to communicate his life story to him and help support him as he processes this. We are overjoyed with the outcome of EP for us. He is an amazing child and has completed our family perfectly.

## Reflections

We have been through a lot together, and we have a strong relationship and a really strong support network around us. I feel this has been invaluable in getting us through EP, and if the placement had failed for us, then it would have made things easier to deal with too.

## Advice

My big take from the experience is that a strong support network of family and friends is absolutely critical to make a success of EP whatever the outcome for the child.



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## EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*“I really wanted the chance to mother a baby and felt that EP was a risk worth taking”*

### Deciding to offer EP

I hadn't considered or even heard of Early Permanence (EP) until my social worker mentioned it. He felt that Concurrency (as he called it) was a good route for me to consider. I had gone into the adoption process a few months prior, thinking I would be lucky to be matched with an under 4 years old, but he really encouraged me to think about EP. He said that many of the younger children, especially babies were being placed via EP and that I should really think about this as a way to be matched with a baby. This did appeal but I was concerned as it was less certain than adoption, but opted to do the EP taster and then the training day offered.

The training days were encouraging and challenging. Getting to listen to and question; people who had adopted via the EP route was really useful, as was hearing about a relinquished little boy who went back to birth family, and how devastating this was for the couple. The trainers, stressed the importance of considering yourself as doing a job as a foster carer and that you were just

providing a loving, stable environment for a child, whilst the system decided what happened to them going forward. They talked a lot about taking the risk, so the child didn't have to. This made sense, and when I did the course, they quoted statistics of 80% of the children going on to be adopted, and 20% returning to birth family/other.

This all left me with a difficult decision to make. Having initially dismissed the thought of having a baby due to the older age of most children in care, I then had had the possibility of a baby dangled in front of me by my social worker, and this was hard to ignore. I really wanted the chance to mother a baby and felt that EP was a risk worth taking, to enable me to do this. I rationalised that the stats were on my side and even if the child didn't stay, it would have given me the chance of caring for a baby. But I also considered the impact this would have on my family, and how they would cope, if the baby left. My family were worried about this, and how it would affect me, but said they would support any decision I made.

So, 7 months after initially calling social services to inquire about adoption, I opted to be dual approved, and went to both the adoption and fostering panels.

### Choosing the Munchkin

Almost immediately after my dual approval came through, profiles of babies who'd been put forward for EP, were being presented for me to consider. However, I'd already booked a big holiday travelling around South America, and kept turning them down. The adoption team knew I was going away, but they thought they'd suggest the profiles anyway, just in case I decided to cancel...

I would highly recommend a post panel holiday to every adopter. It can be a tough 6 months of assessment for some people, and even if you find it fairly straight forward (as I did), it is good to have one last child free adventure!

However, the week I returned from holiday, I was presented with two profiles, one baby boy who was likely to go to EP but this wouldn't be confirmed for another 6 weeks, and a baby girl who was for traditional adoption. I felt the baby who might go to EP was being proposed a bit prematurely, and so asked them to come back to me if it did happen, and after further inquiries, declined the baby girl due to potential foetal alcohol syndrome. I felt really guilty about 'rejecting' the baby girl and kept thinking about her languishing in foster care and that I was being selfish and found this really difficult emotionally. I was still wrestling with these feelings the following week, when I was called on a Wednesday afternoon whilst I was at work, about a little boy who needed an emergency EP placement.



# EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*“I had prepared a list of questions to ask when this type of call came, but in that moment, at work, not prepared, I forgot all of them”*

Now, I had prepared a list of questions to ask when this type of call came (from the EP training etc) but in that moment, at work, not prepared, I forgot all of them! They said there was a 5 months old little boy, who was healthy, no maternal history of drugs or alcohol, who had been in foster care since birth and was well attached, who needed to be moved immediately. On paper he was perfect, and having turned down the previous profiles, I think I felt slightly compelled to not look too hard for issues, in case I seemed ungrateful. (This is definitely NOT the way to feel, and not true. The social workers would prefer the right match, and don't mind how many you reject, but I honestly did feel bad about saying no.).

However, that afternoon, I didn't have to make a final decision, as social care were waiting for the adopters of that baby's mother's other child, to confirm whether they wanted to take on a sibling

or not. I told work what was happening (I am a doctor) and waited. The next day, I got a call to say that the adopters didn't want another child, and so it was now my decision. And that 'dear reader', is how I said yes to the Munchkin.

An hour after the call, I was in a placement planning meeting with my social worker, the child's social worker and her manager, and the family finder who had suggested the match. I was given a little more background information. The birth mum was felt incapable of keeping him safe, and was unable to say for certain who the dad was, and the other immediate family were not considered viable carers. However, social care felt they knew who dad was, and he was currently in prison. The child social worker and her manager, said that a relative of dad's, (who lived abroad and never met the baby), had been in contact with them about being considered as a carer for the

baby, but mum hadn't formally put her name forward and even if she was put forward, that she definitely wouldn't pass the viability assessment. DNA tests were needed on the man suspected of being dad, (if he consented), and once this was done, they could then proceed with a placement order. The court date for this was one month away. This short time frame was crucial, as I felt I could cope for one month, and if court decided he should return to mum etc. we wouldn't have really bonded yet.

At this point, the family finder stressed that I could still say no, or sleep on it overnight, but if I said yes, they would want to start Introductions (handover from the foster carer) the next day. Well, one early menopause, desperation to be a mum, and one paper perfect little baby boy, meant there was no way, I was going to change my mind. That little Munchkin was going to be coming home with me.

## Getting started - The Introductions

The next day, I went into work and cleared my desk, supported by enormously supportive colleagues who agreed to cover my patients and find me a permanent locum, and I finished work at lunchtime, excited and terrified in equal measure.

I was so anxious about going to the foster carer's house - How would we get on? What would she think of me? Would the baby like me? Would I know what to do? But thankfully the foster carer was lovely and the Munchkin was adorable. He was just gorgeous and took to me really well. The plan had been for a short handover of 3 days, but we all felt that this was too quick, and it was extended to 6 days.



# EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*“I'm not sure how well I'd have coped without family/friend support during this time”*

Introductions are exhausting. The mental energy needed to take it all in and keep small talk going with the foster carer, with the physical intensity of being one on one with a baby, whilst being 'scrutinised' by them and the social workers, is so draining. I couldn't wait to bring him home properly. It was also hard, as the foster carer was really upset about him leaving, and I was aware of calls between her and the birth mum, where birth mum was feeling suicidal about being separated from her little boy. This was enormously difficult to handle, on top of all my emotions. It was quite a lonely time, particularly as my long-term social worker was now off sick, and this had all happened around half term, and most of my family and support network were away on holiday. As a single carer, this was particularly hard. I also needed some time to get equipment and supplies! Luckily my covering social worker lent me a car seat and travel cot, other friends lent me a buggy and toys, and I was able to do a massive supermarket shop for everything else.

By day 6, everything was set up and the Munchkin and I came home. He handled the transition brilliantly and slept through and ate everything right from the very start. This made things much easier for me, as I'm not sure how well I'd have coped without family/friend support during this time.

## **First contact**

We had 4 days to ourselves before the first social worker visit, and contact restarting with birth mum (this was for 1 hour, 3 x a week, supervised at a contact centre, and had been put on hold to allow him to settle in with me). Ideally the arrangements for contact should have been communicated ahead of the day and organised well, but this didn't happen. I was told roughly where it would take place but didn't have the details etc. and had to keep asking. Eventually, I was told where the contact centre was, and to arrive 30mins ahead of time, so I could drop him off with the contact support worker, and leave before the birth mum arrived. But of course, mum arrived early and we met in the car park, which was less than ideal. The social worker had talked about her not seeing me yet, or being able to identify my car etc. and here we all were in a car park with no social workers etc. This was stressful and I was upset about how it happened. I did want to have a face to face meeting with mum at some point, but wanted this to be in a controlled way, so now we'd met, I was keen for the formal meeting to be arranged. However, the social worker wanted to wait until after the court date. However the contact arrangements were tightened up, and I did the handover to the contact worker, at a location 2 mins away from the contact centre, and then waited in a nearby garden centre café for an hour with a book, until it was time to collect him again. And very soon, I was on first name terms with the staff as they all wanted to know, why I was there 3x a week!



# EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*“I suddenly felt terrified and had this awful squeezing sensation constantly in my chest, that things were looking less straightforward”*

## The Not-Honeymoon Period

The first month with the Munchkin felt like one giant babysitting job. I didn't expect love at first sight, and I knew it would take time for us to bond, and this was indeed the case. He was very watchful and wary at times, he would often scream and at times I felt he hated me, and at times I didn't like him very much either, when he was just screaming and screaming at me (the confusion, he must have felt about what was going on, must have been awful for him). However, life was too busy to dwell too much on things. Family and friends wanted to meet him, and contact and social work visits kept us very busy. Every day, I wrote copious notes in the foster carer's record, and also daily reports for mum's contact book (she never read or wrote in the book, but I kept it up non-the-less), and a man came and did the Munchkin's DNA test and we awaited the court date.

Except the court date was then put back a month... This wasn't something I'd factored in. I'd planned on a month or so, and now it would be another month before decisions were made. Then the DNA test confirmed that presumed birth dad was indeed birth dad, and suddenly birth mum and dad were officially putting forward the relative who lived abroad, as the preferred kinship carer. I suddenly felt terrified and had this awful squeezing sensation constantly in my chest, that things were looking less straightforward. Also, I realised, it was too late. I had now fallen in love with him.



## “It's just a job...”

An interim court date took place and mum was given supervised community contact, so she could now take him out and about in her contact sessions, which meant that contact was now longer, to allow travel to and from where-ever she wanted to take him (swimming, shopping etc.) and after a few weeks, Munchkin started to react. He would come home and scream and scream inconsolably. He wouldn't want me to put him down, and on days when he went to contact, he would go quiet and watchful again, instead of giggling and chatting to himself all the time. It was heart-breaking to see and nothing helped. His social worker was aware, and they asked the court guardian to ask the court to reduce contact to 2x a week but the court said no. He also started being sick after contact, and this was because mum was feeding him crisps and chocolate (he was 7 months) plus his milk, during contact. His social worker, said there was nothing they could do, as it was up to mum, and I found this frustrating and upsetting. Everyone kept telling me, everything was being done in the Munchkin's best interest but no one cared about making him sick. Eventually my social worker, said I needed to do what I thought was best and negotiated on my behalf, sending some fruit for the snack, and I watered down the milk. I found all this very challenging, and despite my head telling me not to, “I'm just the foster carer, it's only a job”, my heart saw him as “my little boy”.



# EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*"I came home and called my best friend, who came around and let me literally cry on her shoulder."*

## Rollercoaster Summer

Despite the contact trauma, we had a lovely summer. Going to the beach, and the zoo, and doing all the things I'd dreamed of doing as a mum. My parents were in full grandparent mode and my little niece and nephew adored him. Everything we said about the future was "hopefully next year, we'll be able to..." but we knew it wasn't yet certain. I was told that the relative kinship viability assessment was starting towards the middle of August, but I wasn't too concerned, as I'd been told at the start repeatedly that she wasn't viable (as had my health visitor).

During this period, they decided to arrange the meeting with birth mum, and this was just awkward. My social worker told me to treat it as the only chance to ask all the questions, the Munchkin would like to know when he was older, but mum felt sure he wasn't staying with me, so wasn't really interested in answering lots of life story questions. But it was positive in the sense, that I could see how much she loved him, and how young and naïve she was, and felt I could take this information, to explain things to Munchkin when he was older.

Within days of this meeting, I had contact with a social worker, who casually dropped into the conversation that the relative had passed the first stage viability assessment. Passed it?!! I thought she hadn't even started it yet! Another miscommunication. Also, I realised then, that his social worker and the original social worker manager (who had now left), were never going to be assessing the viability. This was done by an independent kinship team, so when I was told in the initial meeting that the great aunty

wasn't viable, this was not true. They couldn't have known. I then found out accidentally (I'd been inadvertently sent a medical report) that the relative had previously been approved as an adopter some years before. The terrifying, squeezing in my chest, deepened and I felt constantly anxious and on edge. I began to cry when he reached out for me, and when he started saying "mama".

No EP training in the world, can stop you falling in love with a child, and prepare you for the rollercoaster of emotions that EP brings. The court guardian came and agreed the Munchkin was happy and settled with me, and that he would have a lovely life with me. But warned me, that the law was very clear. If a family member was found viable, then nothing would be able to stop, Munchkin going to them under a Special Guardianship Order.

## What EP is really all about

At the end of August, the court decided that a final decision would be made at the start of November, to allow the second stage assessment of the relative to be completed by the end of September. Around this time, the birth father came out from prison, and was granted contact too (he was given one of mum's sessions every fortnight) and this was very unsettling for the Munchkin, as he had no relationship with this man, who he was suddenly with; for an hour or two. But his birth father tried and bought him little presents, and although the Munchkin was upset after, he was by all accounts fine when he was actually at the contact session.

September was a difficult time, as there was this ticking clock counting down to November and the

decision. Munchkin and I were now really bonded and I couldn't bear the thought of him potentially going anywhere. Lots of well-meaning friends kept saying "He won't go anywhere. It'll be alright etc." but this didn't really help. I attended an EP support group once every 2 months, which was mixed in its helpfulness. I found talking to people who'd been in similar situations really useful and supportive, but seeing all the people who had adopted via EP before, or where things were going well difficult to handle.

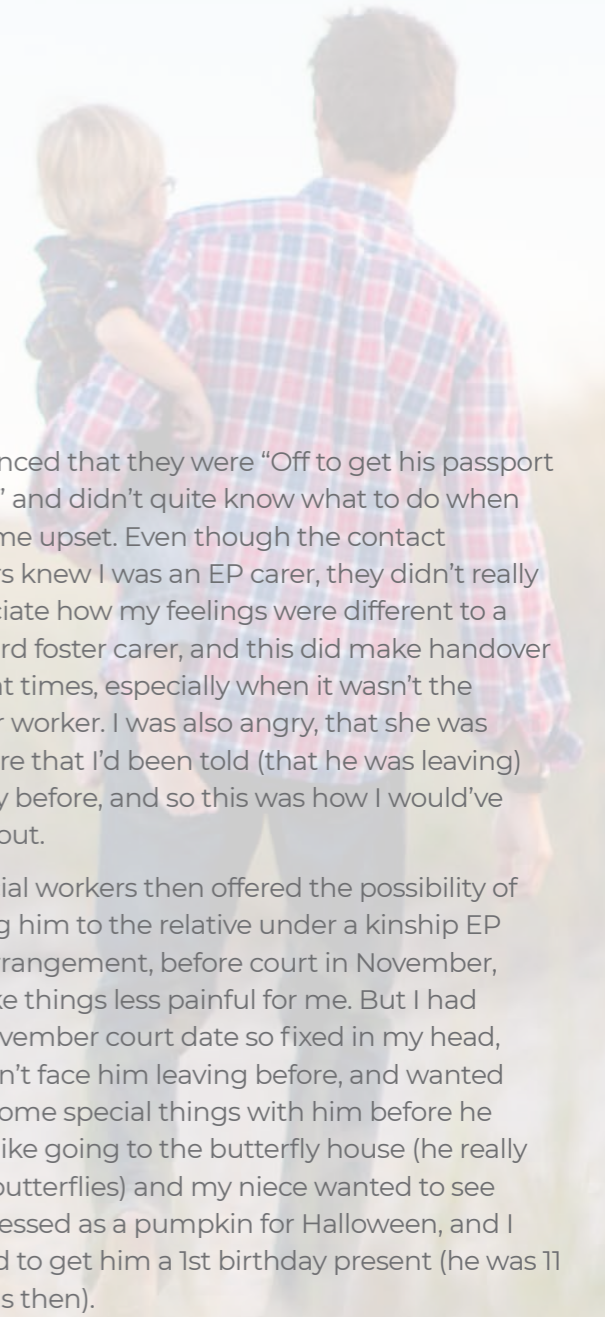
One Sunday in mid-September, I was at my parents when my social worker called, and he said "I just wanted to let you know, that she (the relative) has passed the assessment. So, he will be going under a SGO when they go to court in November." And to be honest I can't remember much more of the conversation, as I just burst into tears. I simply wasn't expecting a call on a Sunday afternoon and was so unprepared for it. I had really hoped she wouldn't pass the assessment, but also thought it would be conveyed in a more formal planned way. I'm glad that I was with my family but I also had to deal with their emotions too. I felt totally devastated and also so guilty for putting them through losing their new Grandson. It was just awful. Unfortunately, on the same evening, we had some further devastating family news, and this meant that my news, suddenly dropped down the priority list for everyone. I came home and called my best friend, who came around and let me literally cry on her shoulder. The poor Munchkin knew something was up, especially as I kept hugging him and crying, but he was clearly confused by it all.

The next day we had contact, and this was really hard. When I arrived, the contact worker cheerfully

announced that they were "Off to get his passport photo!" and didn't quite know what to do when I became upset. Even though the contact workers knew I was an EP carer, they didn't really appreciate how my feelings were different to a standard foster carer, and this did make handover tricky at times, especially when it wasn't the regular worker. I was also angry, that she was unaware that I'd been told (that he was leaving) the day before, and so this was how I would've found out.

My social workers then offered the possibility of moving him to the relative under a kinship EP type arrangement, before court in November, to make things less painful for me. But I had the November court date so fixed in my head, I couldn't face him leaving before, and wanted to do some special things with him before he went -like going to the butterfly house (he really loved butterflies) and my niece wanted to see him dressed as a pumpkin for Halloween, and I wanted to get him a 1st birthday present (he was 11 months then).

So, we had 6 weeks to prepare physically and mentally for him leaving. No one knew what to say. My friends were outraged and upset for me, but couldn't understand why it was happening, my family were just devastated and tearful, my work colleagues didn't know what to do. I had little or no contact from the Munchkin's social worker. My social workers were really supportive and offered me counselling with someone who understood about EP, funded by social services. They arranged for this to start before the Munchkin was due to leave, so that we already had a rapport when he went.



# EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*“My heart hurt so much, and I had to keep saying to myself. “Do what’s best for him, do what’s best for him”*”

## **The Introductions - Journey’s End**

Even though the court needed to make the final decision, everyone said this was essentially a formality and plans were made to start the handover to the relative and her husband. I would have to do introductions again but in reverse. I was offered the option, of renting a cottage somewhere else, and doing the handover there, as I hated the thought of having them in my house. BUT I also knew that for the Munchkin, he needed to be at home, where he felt safe, for it take place, so I said we should do it at mine. My social workers, said they would be there every day with me, if I wanted them to be, and a timetable was drawn up.

Meanwhile, Munchkin loved his butterflies, and we had a lovely little Halloween party. On the Sunday before introductions were due to start, my family

said goodbye. This was heart-breaking, and I really questioned whether agreeing to do EP had been the right thing. Knowing it could happen, and it actually happening, are two very different things. I’d been prepared at the start of doing EP, for him returning to his birth mum, and I’d have been more prepared for this, as I knew she loved him and wanted him. But I hadn’t considered that a family member who’d never met him, could take him after nearly 6 months of him being with me. Unhelpful comments from social care, such as “Well that’s what you’ll do when you adopt a child”- i.e. take them from their foster home, didn’t really help.

On the morning of the court date, we started introductions and we met the relative at the contact centre. This was just traumatic especially as she’d been woefully underprepared – she didn’t have the introduction timetable, hadn’t been

advised to let the Munchkin come to her in his own time (she just pulled him onto her lap and didn’t let go, even when he was reaching for me -there are no words for how hard that was) and also she didn’t understand that I had wanted to adopt him, and just saw me as a foster carer. Knowing that I had to step back and encourage him to go to her, and then also her husband when he arrived a few days later, was incredibly hard. My heart hurt so much, and I had to keep saying to myself, “Do what’s best for him, do what’s best for him.” Having them in my house, and hearing them talk about what an amazing Christmas they were going to have (a total lack of sensitivity...), was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done. It was horrendous. I hated every minute of it and trying to make small talk and be cheerful for the Munchkin was nearly impossible. I cried every night they went home, and he was in bed.

I’d put together a photo album of everything we’d done, and his milestones for him, and this was just very painful. No one from social services had told me to do anything like this, but I wanted him to know how much he’d been loved. It was only after looking at this, that the penny dropped for the relative, and she was happy for me have ongoing email contact after he’d gone.

The morning of handover, my social worker came early and she was there when they (the relatives) arrived. I just handed the Munchkin over in his car seat, (as they recommend a swift transfer on the morning), and was ok, until they turned him round and I saw him looking at me. He looked so confused and betrayed- he knew he was going. I am crying just writing this, as it felt like a stab in the heart. As soon as I closed the front door, both me, and my social worker burst into tears, and he was gone.



# EP EXPERIENCE- THE MUNCHKIN TALE

*"You are in a no man's land when your EP child leaves. They have gone and you'll probably never see them again"*

## Heart-break and Survival

In the weeks after, I tried to keep busy, and I saw the counsellor, which gave me a neutral outlet. Supporting my family was really my focus, as I felt it was all my fault, they were all grieving. My mum became quite low due to this and the other family events going on, and I felt very responsible for this. She felt dreadful for me and didn't know what to do, and my Dad didn't really want to talk about it. My niece and nephew were worried he was missing me, and kept asking if he was ok.

I was also under a time pressure to go back to work. I didn't want to be off too long after my 6 months funded leave, as I didn't want to use my savings (I wanted them in case I tried to adopt again) and taking time off sick would have put pressure on my colleagues, as locum cover wasn't funded unlike my EP leave. So, in the end, I went back after 7-8 weeks.

Taking down the nursery and getting rid of the clothes and things, that hadn't gone with him, was challenging. I kept a few special mementos and donated the rest to a women's refuge, along with the balancing fostering allowance.

About 2 weeks after he'd gone, I had an email from his social worker, thanking me for my care of him. Seems she couldn't bring herself to speak to me directly. I did have a call from the court guardian offering his commiserations and saying that he

knew that he (the Munchkin) would've had a better life, and more opportunities with me. This was kind and a bit cruel at the same time.

You are in a no man's land when your EP child leaves. They have gone and you'll probably never see them again, so it's like they've died. BUT they haven't, and you know they're out there living their life, hopefully happily. I feel like I've lost a child. It hurts like I've lost a child, but that feels disrespectful to people whose children have died. You can't grieve in a traditional way and everyone from social services, whilst expressing concern and sympathy, will say "You've done an amazing thing. You've given them the best start in life and now they can be part of their birth family, which is best for them long term". And you nod, and say you know this, and you signed up for it, but it will take time for you to start believing some of it. I am happy that his birth mum will get to see him 3x a year, and he will get to meet his half siblings now. However, do I believe he's in the best place? – not yet.

After 3-4 months, I felt psychologically ready to start actively looking to be matched again and leaned heavily towards traditional adoption, but didn't discount the possibility of the right EP profile. I felt much better prepared this time around to be looking and more confident in turning down profiles.

## "And at the bottom, there was hope..."

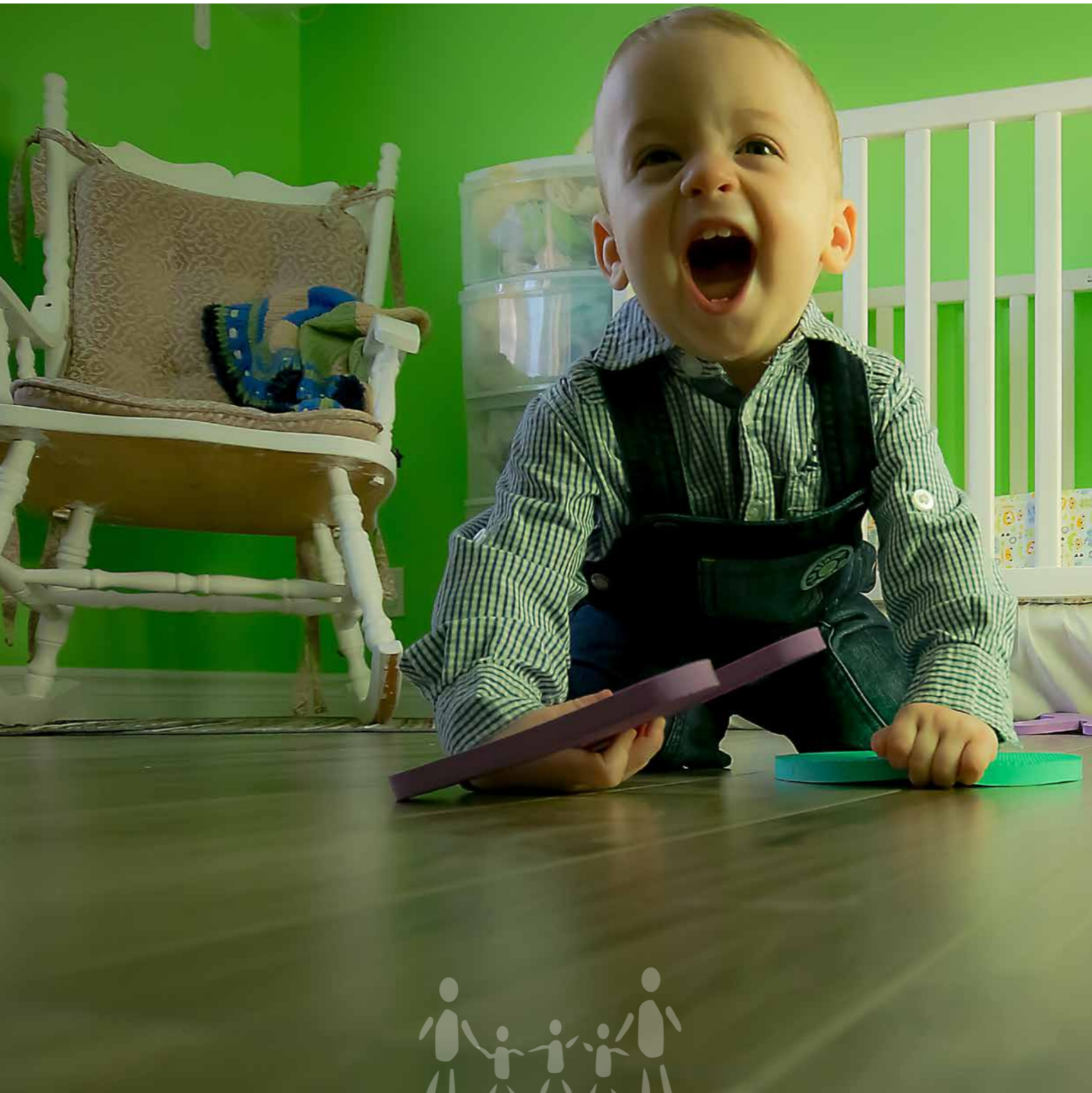
12 months on, I have had 3 email updates, and 2 photos on the Munchkin (I couldn't face any photos for the first 6 months), and we've agreed on 6 monthly emails. I want him to know when he's older, that I didn't abandon him, but I don't want to intrude on their life too much. I am now just part of his past, and his life story. He's changed so much, and I feel like he's a different child now. I think I am still grieving the little boy I had, not the cheeky monkey he's become. I am also now a new mum to a beautiful 9 month old little girl, who came via a placement order (adoption order still awaited). Her social worker wanted her to come on an EP placement, which I considered after ensuring there were NO family members anywhere viable... but the judge thankfully said no, and this took the decision out of my hand. (I think I could've coped but I'm not sure my parents would.) She will grow up knowing about the Munchkin -his photos are out and much loved, and he will now be part of both our life stories, in the tale of the Munchkin.





# OUR EP EXPERIENCE

*"In the end I spent 3 days with BM and baby at the hospital. This was precious time."*



## Deciding to offer EP

Our decision to follow EP was by chance really, quite late on in our adoption approval process with our LA we were told that we wouldn't be able to adopt a child from within that authority. This had been one of our main decisions for choosing the LA in the first place and we felt we wouldn't be high on the list, and a SW would have to actively seek a child/children from elsewhere to create a link. After being approved we moved house and it was nearly a year after approval that we were in a position to start the linking process, but nothing seemed to be happening with our LA, so we put ourselves forward for EP to see if this improved our chances of a link.

## Assessment and preparation training

As approved adopters it was an easy step to be approved as EP carers. We had been through so much ourselves personally that we felt we could cope with the ups and downs of EP, it couldn't be worse than what we had been through already, although we were still open to either traditional adoption or EP.

## Waiting for a placement

As previously mentioned we had moved house post approval, so there was a delay for us in any linking being proposed, plus our LA was not able to place a local child with us (and we felt that we wouldn't be prioritised as adopters) so we hoped EP might improve our chances of a link. We didn't wait very long, a couple of weeks from memory.

## The placement

This happened really quickly with our first child. He was the fourth baby of three other adopted children born to the same parents and was a concealed pregnancy, so no one knew about him until he was born. Our SW called on a Thursday to ask if we'd like to meet him. We met him the following Wednesday and he was home with us on the Friday of that week. The second time around we weren't seeking another child, but social services made us aware that BM was pregnant again about 2 months before the birth. Even though we could never be ready for another baby, it wasn't really a decision and gave us the amazing opportunity to care for our child's sibling, but also to meet the Birth Parents. We met her at 2 days old and she arrived with us at 6 days old.

## Meeting the Parents

I could not have understood how important this was until we did it. It broke down a lot of stereotypes, completely changed my perception of how the BP felt about the situation and about us, but most importantly, it gave context to our children. I felt the meeting would be awkward and that the BP's would feel that we were there to take their baby away from them. I hadn't considered that they would want to meet us. In the end I spent 3 days with BM and baby at the hospital. This was precious time to learn as much as I could about the BP's and introductions for the baby in a safe environment with BM present. Very sadly and very unexpectedly BM passed away shortly after placement which makes this time even more special and valuable.

# OUR EP EXPERIENCE

*"It can be difficult not knowing if the baby will stay or not, it's sometimes hard to push the doubt aside."*

## Contact with BP's

We only had contact with BP's for our second child. In some ways I looked forward to contact. I wanted BP's to see that their baby was being well cared for but initially 3 times a week was tough especially with a toddler at home as well. We facilitated some of the drop-off/pick-ups but when my husband returned to work after 3 months this became impossible and the Family Support team had to do both as contact had dropped to twice a week by then. It's hard enough looking after a new-born baby, having an extra dimension of getting a baby ready for contact, milk, nappies, change of clothes, contact book, getting them wrapped up warm, waking them from sleep etc. can feel like a hassle. In short it can be quite disruptive to your week and frustrating when parents may not turn up but it is necessary and really the least we could do.

## Contact with other Siblings

Our children have other siblings living in an adoptive family a few miles away. We feel so lucky that the children can all be close together and we try to meet with them regularly although we have not discussed each other's expectations of contact so it's not completely clear. The children's ages and family commitments will play a part in the amount of contact each family want, and each will have their own Life Story considerations to think about. At this stage it's an ongoing relationship that we are keen to maintain. We currently meet at a local play group with the youngest sibling.



The obvious challenges with our first child as a new-born baby I suppose are obvious, but nothing could have prepared us! We hadn't met the BP, they had had little or no interaction with social services, there was no contact. He (the baby!) had spent minimal time with them as he was in NICU. He felt like an abandoned baby to us and bonding was easy. The second time around the baby had 6 days in hospital with her BM. Having met them and spent time with BM and baby at the hospital made bonding (for me) with her much more difficult. I felt like we were caring for a grieving baby and I had no idea how to help her. I struggled, I felt terrible for her, terrible for her BP and it took a while for me to take charge of myself and allow a bond to grow.

This was compounded by that amount of time I felt I had available with her whilst trying to look after a busy 14-month old toddler. It can be difficult not knowing if the baby will stay or not, it's sometimes hard to push the doubt aside and allow yourself to bond with the baby. However, that said; it is an incredible opportunity we never would have had and we know without doubt that both our babies have had the best possible care in a safe, responsive and loving environment and I take great comfort knowing this.

# OUR EP EXPERIENCE

*“Go to the groups or adoption play groups even if you don't think you need support..”*

## Challenges and delights

The process with our first baby was relatively straight forward although a lot of time was spent trying to engage with the BP's. There were a few delays with court applications and the continual return of the Annex A report and in all the process took around 14 months. With our second child the process is on-going and we are 14 months in. BM was clear that if she couldn't care for her baby herself, she did not want anyone else in her family or BF family to have the care of her either and her preference was for her to be placed with one of her siblings. We have just been assigned a new SW and are waiting for the relevant detail to complete our adoption application.

## Advice to others offering or thinking about offering EP:

- Meet the Parents: feel the fear and do it anyway! We couldn't have understood how important this was for us and our children until we had done it even though we knew we should if the opportunity arose.

- Get Photos: it feels like it might be awkward or inappropriate to take photos but there might not be another opportunity even if you think there will be. Make sure photos are taken at contact too.
- Go to the Support Groups: go to the groups or adoption play groups even if you don't think you need support, as it good to have a network of friends in the same situation, other people that just get it. I spent the first few months feeling the need to explain myself when I met other Mum's and found it difficult to connect with them.
- Keep a Contact Book: the content might be quite dull (feeds, nappy changes etc.) but they can develop into more and keeps a line of communication open. It's a valuable 'keep sake' for the baby regardless of the court decision / outcome.



# 5 AN EARLY PERMANENCE JOURNEY

*“This little girl needed us and we could make a real difference.”*

## Background

My husband and I have 2 birth children, a 20 year old son and a 15 year old daughter. 8 years ago we lost a little girl during pregnancy and then later found we were very unlikely to conceive again. And so our journey with adoption began. In October 2015 we were approved as adopters.

## What attracted us to early permanence?

We were approached quite quickly by the adoption team to care for a yet to be born baby. Little one's Mum was finding it very difficult to keep herself safe and was using drugs and possibly alcohol. She may also have been a sex worker and it appeared that her relationship with her partner was violent. Little one's birth Dad was in trouble with police because of drugs. As a placement order still needed to be obtained this required us to initially foster the child until the courts weighed up all the evidence. We had been warned that the baby may not even survive birth as Mum did not have regular antenatal care. Having lost a baby ourselves we felt we wanted to commit to this little one so that even if they did not survive at least someone had been thinking about them and loving them.

We discussed with our children the risks involved with early permanence; that we may care for a baby that may then return to birth parents or other relatives. Our son, who, like myself, had studied some Psychology including attachment theory reiterated that early permanence really could be beneficial for the child. Our daughter simply summed up the conversation with “no

matter what happened that child would always be part of our family and we would always love them. We could give that child a good start in life” To fulfill these goals we had to consider early permanence as an option.

We returned to panel to be approved as early permanence carers in November and then started preparing ourselves for baby's arrival, including discussing potentially having Christmas in hospital as we had been warned baby may have a long stay with possible withdrawal.

## Meeting baby

The baby was born at the end of November 2015, a little girl. We had to wait 3 days for social workers to obtain a care order. We found this time frustrating as we wanted desperately to get into her to give her the care and cuddles she needed (we had learnt that cuddles help with the symptoms of withdrawal), especially as we knew birth Mum had been discharged. It was recommended by our social worker to keep a diary and this helped greatly.

At 3 days old we got to meet little one. As soon as we entered the hospital we knew that this was now a much bigger picture than us just extending our family. This little girl needed us and we could make a real difference. I stayed with her in hospital for a week as she suffered some withdrawal symptoms such as shaking, crying, excessive sucking response but she recovered quickly. After being discharged from hospital, she was then readmitted for a further week with an eye infection.



# AN EARLY PERMANENCE JOURNEY

*"It's lovely to hear when a contact has gone positively but does leave you also wondering, what does that mean for us and the placement?"*

## Fostering Role

From then on she flourished. She was a complete joy to look after. We gave our all, holding nothing back as we helped her make attachments to us and members of the family. We were extremely busy. As well as some baby groups we fitted in writing daily logs, writing short reports for child reviews, attending those reviews, completing some compulsory training regarding infant care, safeguarding and first aid, visits from professionals such as our fostering social worker, child's social worker, child's guardian, permanency team, health visitor etc.

It is busy but if you embrace it, make it part of your routine and look at it positively it can be really enjoyable. For example I used the daily logs as a bit of a diary, logging baby's achievements as well as recording things we had done, then using that to plan future activities. Logging meetings too and detailing actions required helps you remain

focused. All the visitors you have is a chance to meet new people and learn new things about the child or early permanence as a whole. As well as this we transported little one weekly to a contact with Birth Mum at Prison. Taking a child to contact with birth parents can evoke many conflicting emotions for an early permanence carer - anxiety for the child's welfare, jealousy, happiness for the child, feelings around a lack of control, frustration and sometimes even guilt when a child returns home with you. Empathy is a very strong emotion.

It's lovely to hear when a contact has gone positively but does leave you also wondering "what does that mean for us and the placement?" Personally the first time I did a contact run was very daunting as I didn't know what to expect, what my role was and I didn't really feel prepared. I had an overwhelming feeling that I needed

to get it "right" for the little girl's sake. I put an enormous amount of pressure on myself, reading up on how best to prepare her for seeing her birth mum whom she hadn't seen for a few months. I sent her in with a transfer object (a teddy blanket I had worn next to my skin) to help her feel at ease and a message for birth Mum in a carefully prepared contact diary. My husband supported me that first contact and I certainly needed it. It got easier though and became routine, taking little one, dropping her off, going off to the local shops or cafe for a couple of hours then returning to pick her up. I met birth mum a few times and it was a positive experience. She was very grateful for us looking after her daughter and there was a mutual respect between us for the role we each played in baby's life.

The fostering phase of early permanence is rewarding and joyful but can also be stressful and filled with uncertainty. Caring for a little person you desperately want to join your family permanently but balancing that with the professionalism needed from a foster carer can be challenging. All of us have started the adoption process as we want to start a family or extend our family. Many, like ourselves, have come to this with a number of losses already suffered, be it a loss of a baby or failed conception. So, as you can imagine, it can be a hard journey with many emotions along the way. Delays in proceedings and lack of control are agonizing for us but we stay focused with the knowledge that we are doing the best we can for the child and by living in the present, not looking too far forward into the future.



# AN EARLY PERMANENCE JOURNEY

*“Birth Mum didn’t engage with social services”  
but did fully engage with me through the diary.”*

## Baby returning to birth family

A change of child’s social worker at 5 months highlighted that necessary paperwork had not been recorded on the system and after further inquiries it became clear that maternal grandparents wanted to care for the little girl. We had been led to believe previously by the first social worker that they had been ruled out at the beginning of proceedings and that adoption was a very likely outcome.

Little one remained in our care while we facilitated direct contact with her grandparents and then after 11 months of her being with us it was decided by the courts to grant her grandparents a special guardianship order. We facilitated a week long handover of care process at our home. Grandparents and sibling coming in every day to slowly take over routines. On the last day we travelled to the grandparents’ home and completed the handover process. We were devastated and completely heartbroken. The heartbreak rippled across our whole family reaching into our extended family.

We were very clear of our fostering role and we had prepared ourselves for return to birth parents or for extended birth family to come forward. However the scenario of birth family coming forward that we had been led to believe had been ruled out at the very beginning of proceedings is a stark reminder that the risks of early permanence are very real. Carers should not be misled by professionals about the progression of a case or be encouraged to pre-empt the outcome. We were very frustrated as we found it very difficult to get across to children’s services that we were not disappointed with the outcome for this little girl but with the processes that had led to that outcome.

After she left we felt privileged to be part of her life story work. The photos, stories and recordings of milestones reached we had collated were all used by the team to help produce a beautiful life story book and later life letter. As early permanence carers, we become a valuable link for the children we care for to their early days. Due to the graciousness of her grandparents we still get to see the little girl every 3 months or so and she is doing well.

## Second placement

From October 2016 until early 2017 we gave ourselves time to grieve and with the support of the adoption team and of lots of counselling we were ready to continue with the early permanence route. We decided, along with our children, to continue with this route rather than the traditional adoption process as despite the risks involved for carers it really is the best option for the child. Reducing the amount of moves for a child, allowing them to make secure attachments and giving them the best possible start is what motivates us to be early permanence carers.

In June 2017 a 4 month old little boy came bouncing into our lives and he remains in our care today. A similar story of drug and alcohol misuse, stress and lack of antenatal care. This little one however had been in a mother and baby foster placement that had broken down due to birth mum’s lack of abstinence from drugs and alcohol. Extended birth family had been properly assessed. As soon as we heard his story the excitement ran through us all and we knew we had to proceed. We did several days of visits with his previous foster carer, slowly taking over his daily routines



and then we got to bring him to live with us. We absolutely adore him and are committed to giving him the best start. He has a placement order, we have been through the matching process and the adoption order paperwork is in.

Our routine has been very similar to our first placement - transporting to contact with birth Mum twice a week and birth Dad once a fortnight. Non-attendance by Dad meant his contact was cancelled. I see contact much more positively now. Using the contact diary as a way of getting to know birth parents and building up a rapport, reassuring them their child is loved and cared for and for gaining valuable little bits of information for the child should they go on to be adopted. Birth Mum didn’t engage with social services but did fully engage with me through the diary. So, we have some lovely stories for him that we would not have had without it. I enjoyed working on the diary, sharing bits of information and carefully selected photos. Hopefully it will be a nice

keepsake for little one showing 2 people working on the same page about loving him.

I have met birth Mum and our meeting very much mirrored that of our first placement. Birth Mum was grateful and courteous. Personally I think meeting birth parents helps ‘un-demonise’ the picture portrayed of them. It gives you a balanced view which you can then convey to little ones over time.

Little one is meeting all his developmental milestones but we remain mindful that we don’t know what the future holds or what effects the trauma he suffered in utero will have. All we do know is the joy he brings with his cheeky smile and we know we would walk through hot coals for him to help him reach his own full potential.

# AN EARLY PERMANENCE JOURNEY

*“The counselling we received helped us process what was happening and focussed us to channel our feelings.”*

## Baby returning to birth family

Because of our experience of the first little one returning to birth family we are always asked how did you cope? What helped?

- It was a long period of time between finding out that grandparents were being assessed to them being granted an SGO so every day we reminded ourselves our main priority was to continue a high level of care of the little girl and that we were fulfilling our goal of giving her the very best start in life.
- In the evenings we would then turn to our own self-care, questioning what each of us needed at that particular time. To talk, to have a hug, to avoid or shed a tear (a technique taught us during counselling and from us drawing on previous periods of grief).
- We were supported greatly by our fostering adoption social worker, who always offered an empathetic listening ear and showed concern for our birth children. She helped us remain child focussed and offered encouragement

and reassurance that we were doing a good job. We have always felt extremely valued by the adoption team. She was present at contacts with grandparents and checked in during the handover process. When the little girl left she regularly asked for updates on how we all were but gave us the space to think about what we wanted to do next in terms of our journey with adoption.

- The counselling we received helped us process what was happening and focussed us to channel our feelings of frustration into helping shape best practise for early permanence. In hindsight the counselling could have started a little earlier. Perhaps as soon as it looked likely the child would be returning to birth family.
- We have a very supportive and understanding network of family and friends. Crucial at testing times like these.

- Being involved with contacts and facilitating handover helped us feel a sense of control and helped build a rapport with the birth family which has now enabled us to maintain a relationship with the little girl.
- The transition plan drawn up by the adoption team was clearly laid out, focussing on the slow progression of care to grandparents. The timings too were just right, giving everyone enough time to feel comfortable and for little ones routines and preferences to be explained in detail.
- Our birth children, although extremely disappointed and upset were resilient. An inspiration to us all. We have always been open about our feelings and accepting that we all grieve in our own way. Our daughter says this helped her feel comfortable expressing her own emotions or at times lack of emotion without it becoming all-consuming or overwhelming.

- The opportunity to express our concerns about how the case was handled was invaluable as we knew there were lessons to be learnt.
- With our second placement we have never looked too far into the future, instead focussing on the here and now and enjoying every moment.
- Second time around Social workers have respected the fact we have wanted to remain child focussed and not become too concerned with case details or dates. First time we were quite obsessed with court dates. Social workers are extremely busy with heavy caseloads and so updates on court outcomes could be delayed leading to anxiety.



# AN EARLY PERMANENCE JOURNEY

*“Our early permanence story shows that we, as adults, take on the risks so that the children don't have to”*

## Differences between fostering and fostering-to-adopt?

One question we are often asked is what the difference is between fostering and fostering to adopt or early permanence? This is how we see our role and perhaps it may highlight the need for empathetic support from professionals:

Day to day they are the same. The children are cared for in our family, we have to write the same reports, we access the same training, we are reviewed the same, we attend meetings and child reviews just the same, we transport to contact and personally we facilitated the handover process of the little girl to her grandparents last year.

However there are a few differences

- The biggest difference is what has motivated us to become carers. It is not a career choice for early permanence carers. All of us either want to start a family or extend our family. Many, like ourselves, have come to this with a number of losses already suffered, be it a loss of a baby or failed conception. So, as you can imagine, it can be a hard journey with many emotions along the way. The fostering phase of fostering to adopt is rewarding and joyful but also stressful and filled with uncertainty. Caring for a little person you desperately want to join your family permanently but balancing that with the professionalism needed from a foster carer can be challenging. Delays in proceedings and lack of control are agonizing for us but we stay focussed with the knowledge that we are doing the best we can for the child and by living in the present, not looking too far forward into the future.

- Another difference is the need at times for anonymity of the carers. This is needed so potential adoption placements aren't compromised. I have personally met both birth mums of our placements but my name is anonymous and address is not shared. With our current placement contact pick up was arranged away from the centre.

Our early permanence story shows that we, as adults, take on the risks so that the children don't have to. When a placement ends, with the right support, you can survive it. Despite the rollercoaster, we as a family remain extremely passionate about early permanence and are committed to being child-focused.







## THREE EP STORIES

*“When we got married we always assumed we’d have children naturally and then we would adopt.”*

When we got married we always assumed we’d have children naturally and then we would adopt. But as the years went by and we found ourselves doing IVF and we realised this wasn’t going to happen. After our final failed round of IVF we decided to give ourselves time out to grieve and take some time to think about what we wanted to do. 2 years later we decided we really wanted to be parents and there were children who needed parents so we began looking into the possibility of adoption. We attended an adoption information evening in December 2012 and in the spring of 2013 we began the process needed to go through in order to be approved to adopt.

In November 2013 our social worker mentioned early permanence and asked if we would be interested. It hadn’t been done in our local authority before and she was keen to get it set up. We went through what it meant with our social worker and we decided it sounded like a really positive way to adopt. We as adults would be taking on all the risk, but the baby would have the chance to be given the best start in life with us as foster parents while their case was going through court and if the court order was granted then we could go on and adopt the baby. For us, this made so much sense as a way of adoption. So we agreed to be guinea pigs for the first one in

our local authority. As it was new, there weren’t any training or processes in place (as there are now), so our social worker and ourselves just had to feel our way through the process. We went to panel in early December and the next day we found out we were to meet our son (not that we knew he was definitely going to be our son then) who had been born 2 weeks previously addicted to heroin and was still in hospital withdrawing. We were asked to go to a meeting with the local authority and when we arrived we found ourselves in a room with the birth parents, who we hadn’t been told would be there. They were quite angry with the social workers present as they were in the middle

of a court case to do with their daughter and had just found out they had lost and she was going to be adopted. It wasn’t the ideal first meeting but as we walked down to the hospital to meet the little boy who would later become our son I got talking to the birth mum and tried to connect with her. By the time we were at the hospital we had come to an understanding that I would be looking after her baby boy while she endeavoured to get herself clean and sorted. She introduced me to her baby boy and handed him over to me for a cuddle. It was my birthday, so to meet the boy who would become my son on that day was so special, if a little awkward!



# THREE EP STORIES

*"At one point in the contact I needed to go outside and compose myself."*



We then found ourselves on the rollercoaster ride that is EP. The court had ordered that the baby should have contact for 1.5 hours 3 times a week with his birth parents while his case was going through court. From January to March, contact was very sporadic, sometimes it happened for consecutive days at other times the birth parents didn't turn up at all even though they said they would, at other times there was no word from the birth parents and contact was cancelled. During this time the birth dad got put in prison, so as it turned out he never saw his son again. Contact was offered to the birth mum all the way up to when the final care order was made in July of that year, but the last time she saw her son was when he was 5 months old. Contact was hard going, the birth mum smoked a lot and the baby often came out crying. We found out later he was the worst case of neonatal abstinence syndrome (born addicted to drugs) the hospital had ever

seen and watching him withdraw from drugs was very hard to watch. No baby should have to go through that but we held him and loved him through it. His senses were very heightened so coming back smelling of smoke after contact we found set him off and he was hard to calm till we had changed his clothes and often given him a bath and washed his hair. We had to learn all these things as we went along with him. That was what was hard with contact - the birth mum had no idea about all these little things you needed to do to calm him so I often found myself having to teach her the best way to hold him and show her how he liked to be fed. It's very hard to do but we wanted to give her the best chance to be with her son. Sadly though she couldn't kick the drugs or get herself sorted so the full care order was made in July when he was 8 months old. It took till January of the next year for the adoption order to be granted due to a number of hiccups! By then he was 14 months old.

## And we did it for a second time.....

We waited a year and decided we believed in the process so much we wanted to do it again and began the process to foster to adopt a second time in January. By July we had been approved and we thought a baby would be found very quickly. After all we had only had a day's wait with our son and while we knew it wouldn't be that quick we didn't expect to be waiting long. However, it took another 7 months of waiting. One night I was chatting to my husband and said to him "I've lost all hope we'll ever get another baby, lets ring our social worker up and tell her we're going to leave it and just be a family of 3". The next day, our social worker rang us to say a baby girl had been born who was withdrawing from heroin and did we feel we could care for her. So we picked her up to bring her home and begin the process again. It felt meant to be! When we went to the hospital to meet her we instantly fell in love with this little bundle who was withdrawing from heroin. She wasn't anywhere near as bad as our son had been but she did require holding 24/7 for a good few weeks. So we invested in a sling and took shifts through the night. It was a hard and tiring time, especially as we now had our son who was 3 and contact started immediately with the birth parents. The court had ordered that the baby girl should have contact 3 times a week for 2 hours and unlike our son's birth parents, her birth parents turned up for every single contact. Because I was the one taking the baby girl to contact and because the birth parents had to see her separately they would often seek me out in the car park to chat and I got to know them both quite well under the circumstances.

By July of that year, when she was 5 months old the court granted the full care order and we were to have a final contact with the birth parents where they could say goodbye to their daughter. With our son, 2 attempts were made to have a final contact with his birth parents but they didn't turn up to either of them, so this was a new experience for us. We got a message through her social worker that the birth parents had asked if my husband and I would attend the final 2 hr contact as they wanted to share this with us. Honestly, I was dreading it, as much as I knew having their daughter with us was the right outcome, it still feels very hard and like you're taking her baby away from her and to have to face it rather than hide away from that reality I found quite stressful. At one point in the contact I needed to go outside and compose myself. But from the outset the birth dad declared it wasn't going to be a sad goodbye and there wasn't to be any tears. My husband and I made sure when it came to changing her nappy, we got everything out so they could concentrate on being with their daughter in their final contact and not worrying trying to find things. They made her a collage of hand and footprints and it was decided for the final 10mins of contact they could be on their own with her, so we and the social worker waited outside. The moment of handing her over to me was so emotionally charged and both the birth mother and I cried and hugged. I told her I was proud of her for getting herself clean and she replied that no one had ever told her they were proud of her.....

We put into adopt this baby girl that summer and it was all about to go through in the October when our social worker turned up and said she needed to talk to us.

# THREE EP STORIES

*“Our son’s birth mum was pregnant again  
(and they wondered if we would consider fostering  
to adopt a 3rd time.”*

## **And again for a third time.....**

It turned out that our son’s birth mum was pregnant again and they wondered if we would consider fostering to adopt a 3rd time. The baby was due anytime between November and January. The birth mum had been prostituting to get money for drugs and wasn’t clear exactly when she’d actually got pregnant. Our daughter wasn’t adopted yet, so we were still approved to foster so after much thinking and discussions with social workers it was agreed when the baby was born she would come to us. Our daughter was now 9 months and 28 days when the other baby girl (our son’s half-sister) was born in early December. She was withdrawing from Heroin like her half-brother had been and was in hospital for 2 weeks where we visited her and helped to look after her. Our son was very excited to meet his half-sister. We had randomly bumped into the birth mum when she was pregnant and it was the first time she’d seen him since he was 5 months old. Unfortunately she was high on drugs, slurring her words and looked wild with her hair all over the place. He was very scared and she kept asking him for a cuddle. I gave her a hug and quickly removed our son from the situation but it took a good couple of weeks of reassuring that he wasn’t going to go anywhere. We’ve always been open and honest about the fact he’s adopted and having our second EP baby had helped us talk to him about it - so while he knew he had a birth mother he’d never met her till that point.

Contact started again and this time my husband did it, simply because we had to think of our son and daughter. Our daughter had just finished going to contact and we didn’t want our son seeing his birth mum again like that. Again contact was sporadic and after 3 months it was decided that it would stop as the birth mum wasn’t engaging with social services. During this time our daughter’s adoption went through and at the celebration hearing we had the third EP baby girl with us to share the moment. Eventually a full care order was granted for the third EP baby in the summer. However due to a number of hiccups with the court losing our paperwork, her adoption order wasn’t made till earlier this year [2019].

We’re now a family of 5 and while it’s been a rollercoaster (or 3), we wouldn’t have changed it for the world. Each child has a different story and each year we celebrate ‘Gotcha’ day with each of them and it gives us a chance to tell them about their past.

## **Would we do it again?**

Yes - absolutely! Early Permanence is so child focused and shifts all the stress and responsibility onto us adults, which we can cope with. We’re very grateful we got the opportunity to do it 3 times and we will always encourage others to think about it. You need to go into it with your eyes open. It’s not easy and it can be very challenging and stressful at times, but is it worth it? Yes!



# 7 ROLLER COASTER RIDE EP STORY

*“Friends and family were amazing.”*

We are the proud parents of a little girl who came to us through early permanence. It's been a roller coaster ride, full of every emotion possible, including those we didn't even know we had, but we wouldn't change it for a second.

## Deciding to do EP

After a long journey seeking birth children of our own, ultimately unsuccessfully, we watched a TV show called 'Protecting Our Foster Kids' which inspired us to continue our quest to have a family, whilst also making an amazing difference to a child's life.

We started learning about a world we previously knew nothing about, having been fortunate enough in our own upbringing and lives not to encounter real hardship and the kinds of awful beginnings some children unfortunately have.

When we were watching the TV programme we really felt that fostering was important and something we could do – we still wanted a forever family of our own though, and that's how we ended up looking at early permanence. The idea that the adults (i.e. us) take on the risk so that the child doesn't have to really resonated for us.

As difficult as we knew it would be, we felt that we could cope with the pain and heartache if the child were returned to a birth family member or friend, knowing we had helped the child when they needed it the most.

## Assessment and preparation training

The process to get approved for early permanence was tiring and challenging, but we learnt a huge amount and were lucky enough to have a fantastic social worker. It's fair to say they knew more about us by the end of the process than we did!

The process felt like a free therapy session where we got to really think about our own childhood and relationships. We were also encouraged to identify any unresolved issues we might have and try to resolve them, which we did, particularly with our parents. This was a very positive experience and we would recommend it to anyone – you need to be honest and brave to get the most from it though.

Meeting adoptive parents at the training sessions really brought the joys and the challenges to life. Sometimes in the training and in the interactions they bring out the worse case scenarios to make sure you are being realistic about what may come your way, but for us we've always felt the positives far outweigh the challenges.

A big milestone for us was when we attended the early permanence training and met a lady going through EP, her baby and her mother. Her experience really struck home for us and also some family members that we brought along.

We found it really helpful during the EP process to have people in our support network that have been through EP and would recommend getting some contact details at an early stage.

As we got keener on EP, our family got quite concerned for us – they were really worried about how we would cope if the child was returned to birth family. We understood they were looking out for us, and were grateful someone was, but by this time we were committed to the principle of EP, putting a child's wellbeing ahead of our own.



# ROLLER COASTER RIDE

## EP STORY

*“Handing her over to a stranger, in a car park, felt like the opposite to what our instincts to protect her were telling us.”*

### The placement

Three days after our approval panel we met Athena for the first time and started a transition week with her. We had a mad rush trying to get hold of a preloved cot, pushchair and all the other paraphernalia most parents have 9 months to collect! Friends and family were amazing and within a few days we were ready to welcome a baby into our home and our lives.

We visited her for the first time at a foster family home, where she had been living in a mother and baby placement. It was so surreal meeting a little baby that could some day become your child – when we walked into the living room she was playing on the floor and we could immediately see how happy and interactive she was.

Athena has always had an incredible sunny disposition, remarkable given her start in life.

We were drawn to her immediately, but had to hold back a little at first as the social workers had asked us to introduce ourselves slowly. The telling moment for both of us though was when we first fed her bottled milk and got to stare into her eyes whilst she drank – we were in love from that moment onwards.

It was hard saying goodbye at the end of the day in that first week but finally when we took her out on our own for the first time, and then took her back to our house, it really felt like we were looking after her and that she was under our care. The foster carers were very kind and encouraged us to be increasingly involved with her, despite the situation clearly being hard for them as they had become quite attached.

### Living together and living with contact

We spent a wonderful few weeks with Athena, with both of us off work and keeping friends and family at arms length whilst we formed a bond with her. It wasn't long before we were seeing signs of attachment which gave us the confidence we were getting things right. Family and friends did struggle a bit when we wouldn't allow them initially to cuddle her or help with her personal care as we felt that it was important we attach with her first as we were basically strangers to one another.

Family, friends and even total strangers would ask us personal details about Athena and it was good to have a response ready! For example we would reply 'sorry we can't talk about her birth parents as that's for her to share if she wants to', or 'unfortunately her birth parents and family

were unable to give her the care she needed.' We would also tell people that we were fostering so that we were not constantly asked what was happening with the adoption part of the process and it also meant it was a shorter and easier explanation, as we didn't always want to talk about it.

As part of the agreement, we had to take Athena to contact twice a week, meeting a contact worker in a car park to avoid direct contact with birth family due to security concerns.

Handing her over to a stranger, in a car park, felt like the opposite to what our instincts to protect her were telling us to do. It was really hard and never got any easier. There would be a two-hour wait, which felt like two days, before she was returned to us.



# ROLLER COASTER RIDE

## EP STORY

*"We're thankful every day that we chose to do EP and love every day we have together, as a family."*

When Athena returned she would sometimes be asleep and when she woke up would be disorientated and upset. She was always very unsettled after contact sessions. Sometimes she would have marks and scratches on her body and we would take photos and report it to social workers, the independent social worker and the guardian. All of this made us even more anxious about taking her to the contact visits. After a while the social workers also considered the frequency of visits detrimental and they were reduced to once a week.

We managed to build and maintain a positive relationship with birth mother by writing to each other in a contact book. We would initially write a note about how Athena had been so far that day, what food / bottles she had for lunch, etc. and birth mother would write nice comments back, for example if she liked what we had dressed her in. We did our best to be positive and respond to requests that were made via the book such as food to provide or clothes to dress her in. This was definitely worth the investment, despite how we felt about the contact visits, as the positive relationship has continued through to the contact letters we now exchange every 6 months.

EP gave us the chance to be more involved in the process and how it affected Athena and her birth family. This gave us more of an insight and empathy towards the birth family that we might not have gained were we to have gone down the traditional adoption route.

We also had a successful meeting in person with birth mother and birth father's grand-mother. We were apprehensive of course but the meeting was

very amicable and we got a photo of us with birth mother. It was important for birth mother to meet us for her own peace of mind and has helped in the positive contact letter arrangement. When we said goodbye we told birth mother we'd take very good care of Athena and she replied 'you better' – as best as we could tell it was with about 50% smile and 50% steely seriousness!

### The final decision

After a lengthy judicial process and many bumps along the road that sometimes looked like everything would fall apart, we eventually received the news we wanted more than anything in the world. Athena had been approved for adoption and we were matched with her.

We went to court with our family and social workers to meet the judge who had resided over her case the entire time. This made a big difference, as he knew everything that had happened to her. Afterwards we went out for a family meal. Although it was clearly a celebration for us all, and the happiest moment of our lives, there was a part of us that remembered that for the birth family out there somewhere, it was the saddest day of theirs.



We celebrate 'family day' every year now on the anniversary.

### The ups and downs

Athena has a big beautiful smile that lights up her face so creating an attachment with her was the easiest and most natural thing we could imagine. Having the opportunity to watch her grow and develop has been everything we've ever wanted. But it hasn't all been easy.

Our support network has been essential and has helped us out and picked us up when we've been at our lowest. Although initially apprehensive about EP, our family and friends have backed us all the way and fell in love with Athena just like we did.

The hardest part of our journey, in addition to the contact meetings, was a data protection leak where birth family were given some of our contact details by the courts. As we had not used a non-identifiable email addresses and not taken our names off the open electoral register (both of which we'd recommend everyone to do), it would have been very easy to find our address on the Internet.

We had to consider changing our surname and possibly our home. However our support network was mostly located where we lived so this would have been terrible. The council ended up paying for some adjustments to our home security, we changed our phone numbers and we subsequently moved home, but nearby.

### Where We Are Now

Athena has very secure attachments with our extended family and us. She has settled really well

at preschool where she has made friends and we are now looking at schools.

Athena knows she is adopted and we show her a life storybook regularly with photos of her birth family. The first version of life story book we got from the social worker was not great but fortunately our own social worker did an amazing job improving it – it's a really important thing to get right so don't settle for anything less than great.

When we send the 6 monthly contact letter we ask Athena what she would like to tell them and also read the reply letters to her. She doesn't really understand them yet but they're all being stored for her so that once she is older she'll have them to look back on.

We have made friends with others adoptive parents and so she gets to meet up with other adopted children. We feel it is very important for her to have her own support network and meet others who have a similar background.

We also meet up with her foster carers twice a year and we feel that this is a good relationship for her to maintain. They adore her and she always has fun spending time with them. One day, they will also be able to give her information and answer questions about the time before we met her.

Life now is pretty much like any other family, with the trials and tribulations of bringing up a pre-schooler. Times will get tougher no doubt – adolescence terrifies us – but we're thankful every day that we chose to do EP and love every day we have together, as a family.



## SUPPORT FOR EP CARERS

### While you are still in assessment (stage 2) but have decided you want to offer EP:

- **Social work support** through your adoption SW.
- **EP Support Network:** Peer support from other EP Carers – you can have your email and telephone number (and a brief description of where you are in the process) added to the EP Support Network List which is a confidential list of EP Carers who are happy to contact and be contacted by other EP carers in the region.

The list is coordinated and updated by Lindy Wootton ([lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org](mailto:lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org)) and Jan Cleave ([jan.cleave@ccsadoption.org](mailto:jan.cleave@ccsadoption.org)) at CCS Adoption. Please contact them directly if you wish to be part of the network.

- Buddy link to other EP carers through your social worker.

### Post Approval at Panel but prior to placement:

- All of the above and ...
- **Support Through Early Permanence (STEP) groups.** CCS Adoption runs bi-monthly EP carer support groups which are facilitated by an experienced EP carer. The groups are held bi-monthly in Bristol with a session in the afternoon for those who currently have a child in placement and need to bring them, and an evening session for those who do not need to bring the child but still want to access a support group.

Please contact Lindy Wootton ([lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org](mailto:lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org)) for more information about the group.

- **Secure Facebook STEP Group.** See below for further details and information on how to join, or contact Lindy Wootton for further information.

### During and Post Placement:

- All of the above and ...
- Also note that the STEP group **may be able to operate an EP peer support outreach visit** to carers who have a child in an EP placement but cannot manage to attend the group. Please contact your social worker or Lindy Wootton for further information if this is something you feel you would benefit from.

### If the court grants a Placement Order:

- All of the above and the adopters can now access all the adoption support offered by their Adoption Agency and the relevant local authority. .

### If the child returns to birth family:

- All of the above plus **Enhanced Social Work Support**
- Up to 6 sessions of counselling/therapy to help the EP family process the loss.

## SUPPORT THROUGH EARLY PERMANENCE (STEP) FACEBOOK GROUP

The FB STEP group is an on-line community for approved Early Permanence (EP) carers in the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) area and their friends and family. This EP support resource is supported by CCS Adoption and is offered in addition to the physical STEP groups that it already holds at its offices and the EP Network Support List it disseminates and updates. We know that being an EP carer brings with it a unique set of rewards and challenges and so the aim of the group is to give EP carers opportunities to connect with each other, ask questions, share experiences and support each other through the many ups and downs.

### How to join the closed EP Facebook Support Through Early Permanence (STEP) Group

To join the FB STEP group you need to have been approved (or recommended) at panel for EP and to have a Facebook profile. You can use your current Facebook profile or set up another that you use to just access the group. It is up to you. Remember that the group is closed and secret, no one can find it by searching for it on Facebook and the only way to be on it is to receive an invite from one of the moderators (see instructions below). Anyone applying to join will be verified as an EP carer by the CCS EP Project Manager, Lindy Wootton before an invite is sent out to them. You can therefore be sure that the site is safe and confidential.

### STEP 1

Send a FB friend request to one of the moderators:

- Kate Rainflower
- Christine Moonflower
- Katy Starflower

Each of the moderators has a picture of a teddy bear as their profile picture to help you recognise them and you can search for them on Facebook.

### STEP 2

Follow up this friend request with a private message to them stating:

- Your wish to join the Facebook STEP group
- Your full name
- Which Adoption Agency you are with

With these facts we will be able to verify you as an EP carer and send you an invite to join the group.

### STEP 3

When you have received the invite to join the FB STEP group you will receive a Welcome Post which will ask you to read the Rules and Guidelines for the group. Please read these and then private message the moderator you receive the invite from to confirm you have done this and agree to abide by them.

If you have any questions about joining the group please contact Lindy Wootton [lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org](mailto:lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org) Tel. 0117 935 0005 who will try to help.



# EP DIGITAL BOOK – LINKS TO USEFUL DOCS/RESOURCES:

## **First4Adoption Early Permanence information:**

<https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/who-can-adopt-a-child/early-permanence/>

## **Coram Fostering for Adoption Carers leaflet:**

<https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Fostering-for-Adoption-Carers-leaflet-2017.pdf>

## **First4Adoption, Adoption leave and pay information:**

<https://www.first4adoption.org.uk/adoption-support/financial-support/adoption-leave-pay/>

## **Gov.UK Adoption leave and pay eligibility:**

<https://www.gov.uk/adoption-pay-leave/eligibility>

## **CCS Adoption Early Permanence Information:**

<https://ccsadoption.org/adoption/what-is-early-permanence/>

## **CCS Adoption – Support for early permanence carers:**

<https://ccsadoption.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Summary-of-Support-for-EP-Carers-Website-Info.pdf>

## **CCS Adoption – An early permanence carer's experience**

<https://ccsadoption.org/news/leah-adopts-through-early-permanence/>

## **Early Permanence Carer's blog:**

<https://becomingmummy2.wordpress.com/>

## **Coram findings from a longitudinal study of early permanence:**

<https://www.coram.org.uk/sites/default/files/EP%20policy%20and%20practice%20v2c.pdf>

## **Coram early permanence information with video of early permanence carers:**

<https://www.coramadoption.org.uk/adoption-process/children-waiting-adoption/adopting-baby-early-permanence>

## **Coram Centre for Early Permanence:**

<https://earlypermanence.org.uk/>

## **Lullaby Trust safety information for babies/infants**

<https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/>

## **Contact details for CCS Adoption Early Permanence Project Manager:**

[lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org](mailto:lindy.wootton@ccsadoption.org) Tel. 0117 935 0005