

## STORIES FROM THE THERAPY ROOM

### **Adoptive Story**

We spoke with a dad, who adopted two brothers (aged 3 and 4 years at the time of adoptive placement) with his same sex partner.

#### **Biggest challenges – the early days:**

One of the fathers explains that Mother's Day had proven to be a challenge. "The first was the worst, they have continued to be a challenge but have got much easier over the years. Now the boys are prepared for what to expect and know about the kinds of mistakes and assumptions teachers will make when talking about 'mummies'. The boys understand 'mummy' as a role that their daddy does and have started to talk about Mother's Day as 'Parent Day'. There has been space to talk about, understand and grieve the loss of their birth mother and process some of the more traumatic memories connected with her".

Other challenges they have faced were, for example, the boys not knowing each other well at first but having to deal with pretty big challenges. The family also found coping with intrusion and invasiveness of the adoption system and professionals whilst trying to establish some sort of normal family life, was a large part of their life at first. This included having to advocate, fight and explain constantly on their children's behalf. They were also advising and managing a complex professional team including doctors, therapists, teachers, judge and social workers which was demanding and emotionally draining. This dad has developed a confidence he didn't realise he had before adoption.

He explains that:

"There is both the actual bureaucracy of paperwork, but also always having your narrative and having to be ready to spin that out whether it be to a doctor or a nurse, or when you go for a random checkup. They misname the boys and sometimes use their old birth names in front of them and all that can make you feel like it's a job and you have to work with other people and you have to teach them which can feel draining most of the time."

#### **Biggest challenges and fears going forward: in a nutshell, living and dealing with trauma.**

He describes how trauma "can feel a bit like a cloud on the horizon. You know it's there. You can feel it, but you just don't know how quickly it's going to move in or when it's going to move in or if it's never going to move in. And so, just having it constantly there can feel draining".

"Trauma comes pressing in on all sides" and is a constant "reality slap" popping up all over the place. However, the trauma feels nebulous; difficult to articulate, understand and help with. This is most likely due to the traumatic experiences occurring mostly before the children had language and ability to organise and label memories; rather they become stored and remembered simply as instincts, feelings and body memories.

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One of the fathers describes:

“(The birth mum) as a person, is thought as both a reality that still exists and as someone who did some really dark things to them and them not necessarily remembering it all. So, they know they don’t like something, but they can’t put a finger on why. You really want to reach into them and just say, ‘tell me, and I can help you with it and I can sooth it and I can help you talk about it’. But sometimes there’s no consciousness to it. For example, they can’t abide being rocked and they can’t tell you why. They don’t like it. They don’t want to do it and they can’t stand it. They will just sit, wet themselves and just sit in it and not say anything and be completely comfortable with it because they’re so used to it. And it’s draining and exasperating, and you think you want to wave your wand and change it and make it better but there is that feeling that it’s still there.”

“There is the challenge of dealing with the trauma and emotionally carrying that with them and seeing that in them. For me, that’s the hardest part of it because it’s just so ingrained and deep. It can feel really taxing for everyone and it can be so easy to just want to avoid it for everyone because you realise it will be hard but it can also bear the most fruits. It’s a double-edged sword, it’s the thing that makes it really hard and different to normal parenting but it is a thing that if you take on you get these amazing moments from them.”

“There are also the sadder surprises where something will catch them off guard and it will create some sort of trigger in them or trauma and you really thought we were passed this. It really gives you that reality slap where you’re never passed it. It’s always there. It’s the nice surprises mixed with the difficult ones.”

Trauma dictates the parenting approach and nuances of daily life. Routine, consistency and predictability; keeping alert to subtle cues or changes in behaviour that inevitably relate to trauma being triggered; keeping an even emotional keel; explaining decisions, planning ahead and coaching a child for new situations are important.

On the topic of routine and consistency the dad says:

“For the boys, I think it’s really important that they have routine and I think knowing where the boundaries are is important. When I say something, it’s what I mean and to build that trust with them. I think with the chaotic past they had, for me, it’s important that when I say something and I mean it, I need to follow it through. But also, not being too chaotic in what time we do things, rules, all of those kinds of things

Being consistent between the two of them is also important, so if one does something and gets rewarded, the other one does it as well. But likewise, if one does something wrong, they get the same sort of punishment, whatever it may be, like to sit on the stairs. So that they know where I am and that I am a center of trust and they can always pinpoint how I’m going to react”.

### **Would you have been the same kind of parent had you have been parenting birth children and non-traumatized children?**

“I think I might have been a little less cautious. For me, routine is always important. I like routine and it naturally goes very well for me and so does being pragmatic and very down the line, but I think I’d be more flexible than I am perhaps with the boys. I think sometimes I can feel their anxiety so therefore it pulls me to be more cautious sometimes and if I feel they are getting more overstimulated, I’ll back off a little bit. Whereas I think if you had your own birth children, that could be more easily regulated. I also think I would probably be a bit higher energy sometimes”.

This outlines the conflict between an overwhelming parental desire to protect vs being therapeutic by facing and processing painful and traumatic experiences. Responding to the well-meaning but relentless minimising and normalising. You can feel caught in over explaining, justifying and disclosing.

Having to interact with parents who don’t understand what being a parent to adoptive children with trauma is also something that is unique to adoptive parents. The dad explains:

“This can be difficult for people to understand, in the sense that people want to empathise with it but actually it’s quite unique and it’s quite different from other parenting.”

“It’s really well meaning and people are really trying to put you at ease and reassure you, but it is also super taxing when you’re trying to explain to people and educate them, as well as defend your child and promote them. Someone minimising it just feels both aggravating and it zaps your energy a little bit. Sometimes I find myself controlling the narrative by saying “I know all children do this but my children...” and therefore over explaining and then I feel bad for oversharing. But sometimes I need that because I need people to instantly understand and not come at me with minimization”.

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The dad also worries that having two dads will make his boys more vulnerable to teasing or bullying in the future but realising that times have changed, and his children will not suffer same prejudices he did.

Another way in which the dads feel they are different with their boys than if they were their birth children is making space for the birth mum in their family. Having a realistic narrative around her that makes sense for the boys. They emphasise that it is important to neither portray her as a “Disney villain” or “sugar coated damsel”. It feels inevitable that one day the boys will have some sort of contact or relationship with her again; he wants to prepare them as much as possible now for that, knowing he may be excluded when the time comes.

### **Biggest Surprise and Joy**

When his children want to emotionally connect and relate – a cuddle or smile can “catch my breath”. Seeing the child completely relax or lose themselves in fun momentarily, without their defences or fears – those moments are what makes it all worthwhile.

“It’s surprising because there are those nice little moments where the flare and affection comes in and you realise it’s not just the surface level, they really mean it.”

“Those moments where they genuinely are filled with pure joy and they’re really enjoying something whatever it may be. Like the other week we were playing freeze tag in the garden and that was a nice thing because we’re all playing and we’re all running around being silly, but we managed to do it without it going crazy silly. We all then finished by lying on the floor and saying, ‘that was exhausting, and you know we’ve all done it, we all had a go, we all won it and we all lost it’. It was good for everyone. Having those moments where I suppose it’s normality and it feels just fun.”

### **What gets this dad through the tough times?**

Here are the three things they said helped their family:

- Being a strong anchor - keeping organised, maintaining a steady rhythm and routine with lots of preparation and predictability.

- Having an adult, anonymous, online space to rant (Twitter) – He describes it as “shouting in the void and getting an echo back”.
- Finally, he says, “Therapeutic intervention and therapeutic coaching has been so useful. To discuss with an expert my children in detail and have the guidance has been re-energising (at difficult points) but also inspiring. It has also helped me to build my confidence in approaches and to resist advice from unhelpful places”.

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