

# Yes, he's adopted, but I'm still his real mum

## PERFECT MATCH

**Kate Bussmann** on the misconceptions adoptive parents have to contend with – often from well-meaning friends and family

**A** few weeks ago, a girl in the park told my son that children are put up for adoption "because their parents didn't want them". I know this girl, and I happen to have both her parents' phone numbers. It took all my strength not to call them and explain the damage this throwaway comment had wrought on mine.

But in all likelihood, it's her parents – or other adults in her life – who need educating. Kids don't tend to make up things like that themselves. They pick them up. And the idea that adopted children, like my own, were "given up", or that they were unwanted, is just one of many myths and misconceptions about adoption that run deep in our culture.

It's a belief that many of our own friends and family held ("Why didn't his family want him?") someone once asked me, thankfully out of my son's earshot, despite the fact that, in the UK, it's not been the case for decades. The days of young women getting pregnant and not being able to keep the child are pretty much gone. Free contraception, on-demand abortion, welfare, social housing and an end to the stigma of illegitimacy mean that there are few relinquished children – an infinitesimally small percentage of the 2,904 children who were adopted from care in the UK in 2018-19.

Today, most "looked after" kids



ANDREW CROWLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH

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are there because they were removed from their birth families; because they weren't safe or well-cared for, because they were being exposed to intransigent domestic violence, drug abuse, neglect, or worse. But that doesn't necessarily mean they weren't wanted. As is often the case, my son's birth family fought in the courts to keep him, putting in appeal after appeal; while there are many gaps in the records, one thing his social workers knew for sure is that he was loved.

My son, and the other adopted kids I know, are extraordinary children. They have been through more than most of us experience by adulthood, and sometimes it seems to me that the mere fact they keep moving through the world, that they laugh and play and learn, is a wonder. The speed with which he, my husband and I became a unit, a family, astonished me, and it was mostly down to the way he cleaved to us, wholeheartedly, while we tried to find our feet as parents at lightning speed: the time between the adoption panel agreeing that yes, we should be his mum and dad, and us standing on the doorstep of his foster family, hearts thumping, was just two weeks.

But love is not enough. Ask a group of adopters (as I did, in the course of writing this) what most people get wrong and they'll tell you about all the well-meaning friends, family members and strangers who insist that now that their child has found a safe, loving home, all the damage wrought by their early experiences will somehow evaporate. There is, as one adopter friend put it, a sentimentalising of adoption, a romantic notion that it's a happy ending, rather than the beginning, or the middle of a story. Blame *Annie*. Blame *Superman*.

"Many of my friends believe that eight years with us must have 'erased' the one year my son spent in care," a fellow adopter told me recently. "To refute that, I have ended up wasting too much time and energy." I met one adopter whose parents refused to accept the idea that their granddaughter would remember anything about it, as she was two when she moved in with her adoptive parents. Years later, the grandparents had her in the back of their car for the first time. "Am I coming to live with you now?" she asked.

Whether a child has conscious or subconscious memories of it, early childhood trauma leaves a mark. Parental substance abuse can cause lifelong damage, and not just the illicit ones: foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, for instance, can cause learning difficulties and problems with the heart and other organs. Natural chemicals do insidious harm, too: high levels of stress, even in utero, can result in a type of brain

damage, where the amygdala – the part of the brain that governs fight and flight responses – is enlarged and overactive, so stress responses are heightened and extreme.

The effects of that are myriad: current and former looked-after children tend not to do as well in school, possibly because they're hypervigilant, focused on potential threats rather than the blackboard; heightened cortisol can cause serious sleep problems; while child-to-parent violence is common in adoptive families. These are children who are much more likely to have diagnosed disabilities. Some adopted kids experience no such diffi-

culties, but often, parenting them is a rollercoaster.

Many of us adoptive families witnessed a regression in behaviour well before self-isolating started in earnest – our kids are hypersensitive to adults' emotions, having had to be from the earliest age. I don't mind admitting that I'm frankly terrified about how we're going to cope in this new normal.

Regardless of their start in life, all adoptive children ultimately have one thing in common: somewhere down the line, they lost a family, the stuff of any child's nightmares. And not just one family: our son was fortunate to have had a single foster placement before he came to us. (22 per cent of

We've had him longer than that now, and he's spent more time in our family than not. We don't look alike, so it's obvious that there isn't a biological connection, but our bond – just as in the many other adoptive families we know – is plain to the naked eye. The vast majority of people who even glance at us seem to understand easily enough that we are mother and son, father and son; just like when you look at two adults and you can see they're romantically involved. It's palpable, visible, obvious.

It is proof that love isn't about genes, or biology. After all, as an adopter friend put it, "we 'adopt' our partners and they us. Adoption is everywhere." I just wish more people understood.

## SEVEN THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T SAY TO AN ADOPTER

### DIDN'T YOU WANT KIDS OF YOUR OWN?

My son is my own. He's also my "real" son. On which point...

### WHERE'S THEIR REAL MUM/DAD?

My response is usually: "You're looking at her/him." This was said by a nurse (a nurse!) to an friend and adoptive father of three kids during a trip to A&E. It usually seems to be a clumsy kind of small talk – meaning, "where are the birth parents?" Instead, it comes across as: "Who the hell are you?"

WHERE'S HE FROM? Many adopters have to go to great lengths to

keep their child's new identity and location secure (we're often the reason schools ban the posting of class photos on social media). Again, this is often intended as small talk; explaining why we can't answer tends to kill a conversation stone dead.

### ALL CHILDREN DO THAT

Yes, all children sometimes misbehave or find change stressful or have night terrors. As one adopter said to me: "Of course they do, to some extent. But not so frequently and not so intensely and not so worryingly."

### YOU'VE DONE SUCH A GOOD THING...

I get it: this is intended as a compliment. A lot of adopters aren't bothered by this. But what I hear – and what my son could hear – is that he's some sort of charity case, and that he should be grateful to us. Not a message I want him to absorb.

### SO WHY WAS HE/SHE ADOPTED?

That's his story. It's not ours to share.

### DO YOU GET TO CHOOSE?

Honestly... How else would it work? As a lottery? Of course you do. And we chose really, really well.

**FAMILY BOND**  
Kate Bussmann and her son at home

Adoptive children all have one thing in common: at some point, they lost a family

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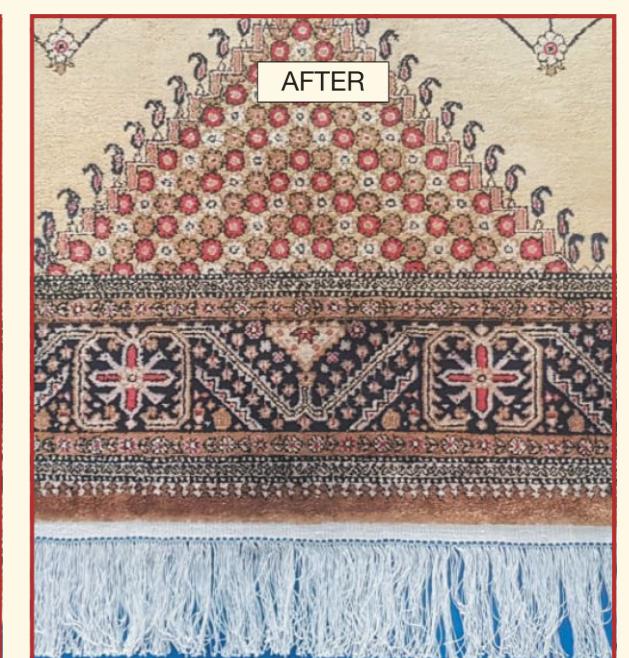
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