

Information for friends, family, employers, and colleagues of early permanence carers

Who is this information for?

You may be aware that your friend, colleague, or family member has been thinking about adoption for some time. You may understand adoption but not what adopting by early permanence (Concurrency or Fostering for Adoption) means.

If someone you know has chosen to adopt via an early permanence route, what does this mean?

This means that they will have been (or are being) not only assessed and approved as adopters but also as foster carers for a child who needs an early permanence placement. The plan will be that they will have a child placed with them for whom they will function as foster carers while the court process continues, and final decisions are made about the child's future. The Local Authority may have completed assessments on the birth parents and concluded that they are unable to care safely for the child in the long term, or some of these may still be on-going. The Local Authority will also have looked for and assessed any possible wider family members for the child and at the current time decided that none are suitable to care for the child. Therefore, the Local Authority will have assessed that there is a high likelihood that the child will need a plan for adoption. However, it is important to realise that the courts have not yet agreed this plan and it is possible that the court may not agree with the Local Authority at the Final Hearing stage. This could mean that further assessments were ordered, or the child could be returned to their birth family.

Why might the child go back to live with their birth family?

Children are best brought up within their own families wherever this is safe and possible and this principle is enshrined in English law in the Children Act 1989. Sometimes it can be difficult for birth parents to care for a child, and they need additional services to help them meet the needs of their children. For some parents, complex problems and previous parenting histories may prompt the Local Authority to consider other plans for the child's future at the same time as trying to support change in the birth parents. Local Authorities often work on these plans simultaneously. People can sometimes make drastic changes to enable them to care for a child and they must be given every reasonable opportunity to do so, as long as the time scales they are given in which to change also fit with the needs of the child. The courts may take a view that the Local Authority has not offered enough support to the birth parents, or that they must be given more time to make changes. Adoption is a very drastic step as it severs the link between the child and their birth family for ever. It is clear from statute and case law that adoption should only ever be seen as a last resort after all other options have been carefully considered. However, if the social work assessments on the birth parents and the wider family are robust and the options for the child well analysed in the child's care plan it would not be unreasonable for the Local Authority to ask the court to agree with their plan.

Why not wait until all the decision-making is over before placing the child with adopters?

Children need a stable and secure permanent home in which to develop and grow. We know from research that being in temporary foster care is harmful to children and any unnecessary moves can cause further disruption and damage. Children need stability and good quality care, especially in their early years in order to form secure attachments to their primary carers. If children develop a secure attachment to their primary carers this will form their attachment pattern for life. Likewise, if they form insecure or chaotic attachments to their primary carers it will be very difficult for them to form more functional positive relationships later in life. Therefore, the goal of all child and family social work is to achieve timely permanence for a child, preferably within their birth family but if this is not possible within another suitable family. Early permanence placements enable a child to start living in their permanent home and begin to form secure attachments to their EP carers as early as possible, avoiding more months of temporary foster care and another disruptive move to adopters after the granting of a Placement Order, as if the court agrees with the local authority that adoption is the right plan for the child – the child is already settled in their permanent adoptive home.

Isn't this asking a lot of early permanence carers?

Yes, you are right, it is. However, we believe that the sooner a child is placed in their permanent adoptive home (if that is their plan) the better. Some adopters will also be keen to offer a child the stability of permanence as soon as possible and commit to that child from an earlier stage in their lives and in their care journey. Your friend, colleague or family member will have been carefully assessed and prepared to undertake this role. They will also be well supported by their social worker. If you are very closely involved in this journey as a prospective adoptive grandparent or aunt/uncle hopefully you will have been given the opportunity to attend an information session or some training yourselves. However, do not worry if this has not happened, as it should still be possible for you to get to talk to your family member's social worker. Please contact your local authority directly.

How can I help the person I know who is an early permanence carer?

It is great that you are asking this question as being an EP carer is demanding and people undertaking this role with need understanding, support, and acceptance from those around them.

Below is a checklist of points that may be helpful. But remember everyone is different so it may be best for you to check out with them what would they find helpful.

- Remember that the child they have living with them IS NOT THEIR ADOPTED CHILD but a child they are acting as FOSTER CARERS for.
- Decide up front with the carers what they want you to tell other people about what is happening: what story do they want you to tell?
- Be perceptive about what they may need your help with – work out what you can do for them and consult with them.
- Encourage them to ask for help but also offer so that they do not have to do the asking.
- Provide them with practical support such as cleaning, cooking, and shopping.

- Have a balanced approach to the situation they are in as there is a chance that the child will not remain with them; it is therefore not helpful to be too gushing!
- Find ways to manage your own emotions and be balanced around the carers. Think about how you will achieve this before they have a child placed with them.
- Try not to ask questions about the long term, such as which school or nursery they will attend.
- Accept that the carers may not be as available to you as they were in the past.
- Be flexible, listen and provide reassurance.
- From time to time, remind them why they decided to become concurrent carers.
- Gently help them to stay focussed on the best interest of the child.
- Help them get through on a day-to-day basis rather than looking too far ahead.
- Provide them with affirmation not criticism.
- Help them to appreciate even small things, for example enjoying the child's milestones and first experiences.
- Spread the word about what you have learnt or know about concurrency to the rest of the support network.
- Provide the carers with a break by going for a walk with them and baby, or by being in their home so that you can make them tea or play with baby.
- The carers will have been told to not refer to themselves as 'mummy' and 'daddy' but to use first names. It would really help for you to do this too.
- Please remember that the child they have living with them has birth parents and is still in a relationship with them while assessments continue.
- EP carers have found it very upsetting to have people congratulate them on becoming a 'mummy or a daddy' when they hear a child is living with them. Please refrain from doing this.
- Because the child they have living with them is in the care system, confidentiality is important, and they may not be able to share much information with you. Please understand this.
- When the child is first placed with them your friend, colleague or family member will be focussing on helping the child to build a secure attachment to them. This will mean that they may not seem very sociable to you, and you may feel pushed away. Please understand this in terms of the task they have taken on; the child is not 'theirs' and it would not be good for the child's development at this stage to be having contact with lots of different people.
- Being an EP carer is challenging. Just 'being there' for your friend, colleague or family member can be a great support. Listening, but not asking lots of questions or giving your own opinions can help.
- Your friend, colleague or family member may themselves be struggling with very strong feelings at times. If you have strong feelings triggered by this process, try to get support for yourself so that you do not end up burdening the EP carer with your feelings to cope with as well.
- If people wish to send a card or gift send it to the child who can take it with them if they leave.
- Please do not buy 'Congratulations on your new baby' cards.
- Refer to yourselves by your first name, you are not the child's Granny/ Grandpa/ Auntie etc.

- Remember that your friend, colleague, or family member has chosen to care for a child in this manner and been assessed and prepared to do so. It can help to have and show confidence in them and their coping abilities.

If the court agrees with the Local Authority that the child's birth parents (and no one in the wider family) are not able to provide a safe and secure future home for the child the Local Authority and that adoption is the plan for the child, they will make a full Care Order and Placement Order at court. It is at this stage that your friends, colleagues, or family member can begin to think about themselves as the child's prospective adoptive parents. However, if the birth parents contest the adoption, they may still have a long journey ahead of them until they have an Adoption Order, and the appeal period has expired.

If you have any questions about anything in this information sheet please contact your Local Authority Adoption/Fostering Team or you're the Adoption Agency your friend or family member is adopting through and ask to talk to someone about early permanence (Concurrent planning or Fostering for Adoption), or visit www.first4adoption.org.uk.