

Written evidence submitted by We Are Family (WAF) (GRC0008)

Adoption leave: the experience of adopters on adoption leave and in lockdown

This briefing sets out the background of We Are Family and the specific challenges faced by parents on adoption leave, including a case study. Also included is a report on how adoptive families are faring more generally during lock-down.

Background of We Are Family (WAF)

We Are Family (WAF) is an adoption support community and registered charity. We run peer-to-peer (i.e. parent-to-parent), user-led events across London and also provide various member resources. All our events are designed and run by our service users, who are adopters, on a voluntary basis. We define 'adopters' to include prospective adopters (approved adopters in Stage 2 of the current adoption process), those with newly placed children and those who have been in it for years.

WAF was originally founded in 2013 by a small group of adoptive parents who wished to provide local peer-to-peer support for adoptive parents. From one group in Hackney & Islington, the organisation has grown to its current size of ten local groups and providing many pan-WAF resources. It was registered with the Charity Commission in August 2015 and is governed by a board of trustees, many of whom are adoptive parents. WAF currently operates seven local groups: East London, Hackney & Islington, Havering, Richmond, Shepherd's Bush, Southwark and Thurrock. WAF runs a further three cross-London groups: Prospective Adopters, Singles in the North and Singles in the South. WAF has supported approximately 800 families over the past six years. We have over 550 actively engaged individual members.

Feedback from our members

To inform our response to the request for information from the House of Commons Petitions Committee WAF sent a four-question survey to all members which was open for four days. WAF asked members below the following questions

- Q1: Have you had any particular challenges on adoption leave during coronavirus?
- Q2: What is the impact of the lock down and coronavirus pandemic of your children?
- Q3: Has lock down had a negative or positive impact on bonding?
- Q4: Are there any particular problems facing you going back to work, such as the ability to find suitable childcare?

The responses have been provided below, to help illustrate to the committee the experience of adopters on adoption leave.

The importance of being home.

Adoptees today have almost invariably suffered early trauma and there are many associated challenges facing adoptive parents. When a child is assessed by children's services their primary need is recorded. There are a range of reasons why a child is looked after but for the majority it is as a result of, or because they were at risk of, abuse or neglect (63% of looked after children in 2018/19). Family dysfunction accounts for 14% of children who are looked after and 8% are looked after due to their family experiencing acute stress.

To ensure a secure attachment both for the children and the new adoptive parent it is vital that an adoptive parent can stay at home as long as possible. This will help those early bonds to develop, help to build confidence and ensure a successful placement.

At WAF we know that isolation and lack of support are major factors in depression, particularly post-adoption depression syndrome (PADS). Many WAF families live with very challenging behaviours and wider impacts that are directly related to the pre-adoption adverse experiences of their children. We know about WAF members who have suffered PADS after the placement of their children and others who have suffered what is known as 'blocked care'. Blocked care is a term used to describe parents' emotional, physical and biological responses to children's insecure attachment behaviours which results in parents no longer being able to make a healthy connection to the child. It is rather more serious than what is often termed as 'compassion fatigue' and can, eventually, lead to adoption breakdown.

Adoption breakdown is not only caused by PADS but can also be the result of parents being unable to manage some of the most challenging behaviours of children, which can include aggression such as child-to-parent violence. These behaviours can be triggered by transitions, such as the move from foster care to adoptive placement, or external events, such as moving to a new house, starting a new school and other factors that lead to changes in routine – including COVID-19. Families experiencing these behaviours need strong external support, both from their family and friends as well as professionals, to cope and to find ways to reduce them. When adoption breakdowns do happen, they have major traumatic impacts on both the adoptive parents and the children. Children may have to go back into care, where finding a new placement may be very difficult due to the impacts of having their "forever family" break down.

We believe that by extending adoption leave in response to COVID-19 families will benefit from establishing normal routines and may help prevent adoption breakdown.

Challenges faced by those on adoption leave during COVID-19

[Loss of routine](#)

Parents on adoption leave will only recently have been placed with children and it is one of the most critical times in the adoption process: the child(ren) is (are) processing the loss of their foster carers and everything they built up there (friends, nursery/school, activities, their rooms, any pets, etc.) while the adoptive parents are trying to build attachments and establish routines to ensure their child(ren) feel(s) safe and secure in their new home.

"[The impact of lockdown has been]mainly negative as I have all 3 children on my own all day while my husband tries to work upstairs. It's virtually impossible to give each their own attention and meet their individual needs. I'm unable to sit and undertake home learning with my six-year old as my 18-month old needs constant attention so I feel I'm failing [on] aspects. [I]t's extremely stressful and demoralising and not how I wanted to use my adoption leave."

For parents currently on adoption leave, this may now have become more challenging: the routine that the children would only recently have established will have been changed by lockdown. These routines are very important for children who have experienced trauma (experiences of neglect, indirect and direct domestic abuse, parental substance abuse (including during pregnancy), sexual abuse) as they build predictability and therefore help to foster a sense of security and allow for the building of attachment to the adoptive parents. In other words, shortly after a major, unsettling shift in their lives, the children have to go through a second one in a short period of time – and one that brings with it a sense of insecurity around personal wellbeing and health, which can trigger past trauma in children.

“Yes, Lockdown has been a huge trigger for my three adopted children. Loss of routine, loss of seeing friends/family, witnessing anxiety/stress at home. This has all caused behaviour regression.”

“Yes, I have become a referee for two very, very, very angry children who lash out at me and each other constantly.”

Isolation

Those on adoption leave are often more isolated, as at the start of the placement they will have had to limit contact between their support network and their children to ensure that the children are not overwhelmed by meeting new people and to help to promote attachment. This means their support network might not be able to rally around them as much as others, as they might have not yet built a meaningful relationship with their children.

“They have found the lockdown period incredibly scary and unsettling, with a resulting impact on their behaviours. They are both incredibly anxious and clingy, and feel abandoned by members of our extended family and friends who they are unable to see. Our four-year-old daughter, who is a survivor of sexual abuse, has taken a huge step back and we have seen a return of many concerning sexualised behaviours which we had, until the start of lockdown, been able to manage well through therapeutic parenting techniques.”

Changes to Professional Support

Support for adopters will have changed, as the regular face-to-face meetings with social workers will have to be online. The additional support they might access through the Adoption Support Fund may also be limited or had to change. For example, direct family therapy may have to be online or not been able to take place at all.

*“Huge impact. My older 2 children in particular. Increased repetitive and stimming behaviour, emotional dysregulation, tantrums/anger. This in turn puts increased stress on us as parents whilst also trying to work at home and try to manage home learning. We have had a close family friend bereavement, which has impacted myself, and this has caused a lot of stress for my children – loss obviously being a huge trigger for them. **I had just been offered further therapeutic help for my son via the ASF but this has had to be put on hold and ironically we need it more than ever.** I’ve recently only adopted my 3rd child and I have lost bonding/attachment time with her because I’ve lost childcare/school for my other two. I’m not able to attend baby groups with her either. Both my older children are used to being outside lots and exercising to relieve stress/energy and this has been greatly restricted/made difficult increasing behaviour regression at home. Trying to undertake home learning with my son has put increased stress on our relationship.”*

Issues facing adoptive parents in going back to work

Until an Adoption Order is approved by the family courts, children placed with prospective adopters will still be “looked after children” and as such will be classified as vulnerable children. The expectation would be that the children would be able to access education during COVID-19. However, education settings, especially early years, may have reduced provision due to a lack of children and this means adopters would face issues returning to work.

It is worth noting that adopters face issues regarding the progress of their cases. This could include, for example, Adoption Order applications being delayed or those about to start adoption leave may have it disrupted due to introductions and placements being paused. This can also increase uncertainty for the children, over their future in the adoptive placement.

"I'm due back in October. I am a nurse and yes if schools are not open usual hours we will definitely struggle with childcare. My youngest has her name down for nursery but again I'm not sure at this stage what will be happening with the nursery reopening."

"I have returned to work with no ability to send our children to their pre-school and no idea how we will manage when my husband is able to start working again at the start of July if the preschool has not opened and we have not been able to find a childminder to care for them while we are both working."

"No childcare. School hours much shorter than my expected work hours. Need to be at work an hour away at the exact same time I'm meant to be dropping kids at school. School pick up in middle of my work day."

"The main challenge has been that we have been unable to settle our three-year old into pre-school prior to my return to work after 14 months of adoption leave. We had planned this so that there would be a month during which I could support him through the transition (something which he is going to find incredibly challenging having barely been apart from me since coming home) but he has yet to attend the pre-school which closed two weeks before he was due to settle in, and I am now back at work with no idea when he'll be able to start. It is a cause of huge anxiety for my husband and I that we do not know how we will be able to support our son through the transition when we are both working."

Positive experiences

Though we would often expect challenging impacts of lockdown, we should also acknowledge that some families are reporting that their children are enjoying being close to their parents and that this has in fact strengthen their families.

"On balance, it has had a positive impact as both of us parents have been at home with the children 24/7 during lockdown. The challenge now, however, is that I am now working from home and not able to give them the attention they have become used to and this is making both of our children feel very unsettled and abandoned"

How are adoptive families generally doing?

This is a stressful time for many adoptive families in general, with the additional challenges outlined above for those adopters with newly placed children. The disrupted routines and the general sense of insecurity, e.g. concerns around personal wellbeing and health, many of our families have seen a regression in terms of behaviour but also the resurfacing of early trauma that may be triggered by the feeling of insecurity or vulnerability to an external threat (i.e. COVID-19). With limited access to face-to-face support services, this can add to the challenge for adoptive parents to manage and to feel supported, while also juggling – as all parents are doing – the demands and expectations around home working and home schooling.

WAF sent a survey, two weeks into lockdown, to all 550 members on the impacts of COVID-19 and the support they might need. The response rate was 24%. The respondents proportionately represent the geographical spread and adopter status of the entire WAF membership. The main themes on the impact of COVID-19 that emerged in the qualitative feedback were:

- Increased anxiety and depression for parents,
- Dealing with trauma resurfacing,
- Behaviour regression in adopted children,
- Parents being exhausted,

- Changes to routines,
- Uncertainty about the adoption process for prospective adopters and parents who are pre-adoption order

It was not uncommon in the feedback to see comments about children whose anxieties about loss and trauma were coming back to the surface. This would include members reporting more nightmares, stealing, or hoarding of food as well as child-to-parent violence (CPV).

“No respite break. Extremely challenging behaviours from children. No space to look after own mental health.

Case Study - adopters on shared adoption leave

We are halfway through our shared adoption leave; we have spent almost as much time in lockdown as we have out of it. Parenting children who have experienced trauma (both the trauma of their time before care and the trauma of moving from a foster placement) takes both skills and experience. While we have had some workshops and training during our adoption approval process, as new parents, this is something that we are still developing.

These factors make lockdown even more challenging for us. First, our routine has dramatically changed. We are spending more times indoors, with the same range of activities, which we sense are getting a bit boring for them. Our WAF playgroup is no longer running, like the other activities that used to help us to have a break and give our children new and interesting experiences to help them feel comfortable in their new local area. Seeing other adopters is vital for building confidence for us as new parents and that opportunity to share insights has now been lost. Our children have lost their old friends in the move and tentative new friendships they had since developed have again been lost.

A key element of an adoptive placement is that, in the early stages, new adoptive parents ensure they do not introduce their new children to family and friends so as not to overwhelm the children with new people. This allows them to start building their main attachment with their new parents. You are told to keep your support circle local and small. In our case, we had only just started to introduce them to others when lockdown happened. Our children have met a couple of grandparents and other relatives but not all, and only once. Our family remain strangers to our children for now and that may remain so for a year or longer. Virtual contact is less impactful. Similarly, our close friends cannot be there for us in person and have largely not met our children, so do not fully understand what we are going through. This can make us feel quite isolated and sad that we cannot yet build our children’s relationships with the important people in their future lives.

Secondly, our children’s nursery setting has changed. They can still attend, though we felt under significant pressure not to take them to school. This was because the initial government advice prioritised staying at home over keeping vulnerable children at school. Both the children’s social worker and the nursery questioned us as to why they couldn’t be at home safely, with us arguing continuing to attend (part-time) was for their emotional wellbeing rather than their physical safety. Government advice has changed since then to make it explicit that vulnerable children are expected to attend, but that new guidance is much less relevant now. The nursery setting itself has changed as well, with only a small number of children attending (mainly of a much younger age) and set in a different room. Initially, our children thought we had taken them to a different nursery altogether.

Lockdown was thus yet another major change in the children’s lives and has presented us with new challenges. For children who have developed a secure attachment to their parents and carers this change might be scary and triggering, but they may be more likely to adapt quicker as they have a secure attachment to build on. As our attachment to them and the children’s attachment to us was still developing, lockdown has had a huge impact on us. Most challenging of all, certain times

became frightening for them and for us. For example, for the last seven weeks we have spent each day experiencing child-to-parent violence. A draining, exhausting, and confidence-undermining experience, with only social work and therapeutic support available by phone or videocall to help us. We have no escape from this and with nursery due to return but looking and feeling very different, we feel forgotten by the majority.

One of us is due to return to work, with the other taking Shared Parental Leave shortly. For us, the ability to have longer, to build real relationships in more normal times without the worry of an imminent return to work would be life changing.

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