

ADOPTION INFORMATION PACK

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1 INTRODUCING OURSELVES

Thank you for requesting our Adoption Information Pack, which we hope you will find useful. This will be the first of several packs of resource material made available to you should you wish to work with us towards adopting a child or children.

St. Francis' Children's Society (SFCS) has been building families through adoption for over 70 years and in that time we have placed over 2000 children in new families. At any one time, there are estimated to be 3000 children in the UK awaiting adoption; SFCS is one of a number of independent adoption agencies working towards finding new families for these children.



SFCS has experienced staff working from its office in Milton Keynes. We work within a 50-mile radius of our office, covering Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, North and West Hertfordshire, and parts of Cambridgeshire and East Anglia.

We host three information events every month in our purpose-built Family Centre – visit our website for further details: www.sfcs.org.uk/adoption-connections/

A specialist agency

Our main focus is on placing vulnerable children with new families through our **Adoption Connections** service, which delivers excellent results and exceptionally low disruption rates.

Our personal, effective and flexible service helps people to overcome barriers to adoption, and the wide range of support services available to our adopters – before, during and after a child is placed with you – are second to none.

But we don't stop there. Birth relatives who have lost a child to adoption may be able to access our renowned **Birth Connections** service through their local authority, providing them with support, advice and counselling.

And our **Building Connections** service is there to help adopted adults and birth families to trace their family members, whilst offering the vital support and counselling this often difficult journey requires.



We seek families for...

- Children of all ages, but particularly those of school age
- Individual children and sibling groups
- Children of black and mixed parentage
- Children with specific difficulties and needs

...in fact, any child who needs to belong within a family where they are loved and wanted for themselves.

All kinds of families for all kinds of children

We welcome enquiries from anyone who wishes to consider adoption, **regardless of age, race, cultural background, religion, marital status or sexual orientation.** We also welcome enquiries from **people who already have children.** If you have a strong commitment to children, lots of patience, energy and love to offer, we'd love to hear from you.



Our commitment to you

If you choose to work with SFCS on your adoption journey, we promise you:

- A warm welcome
- A personal, professional service throughout
- Excellent training programmes
- On-going support whenever you need or want it

SFCS is supported by fees paid by Local Authorities for placements identified for children in their care; by awards made from grant making trusts especially for the innovative projects within the agency; and by individual donations and fundraising efforts from a wide range of sources.

SFCS is a well-respected adoption agency. We have a reputation for **innovative work**, being well known particularly for our commitment to finding families for the children who wait longest in care and for our counselling and support work with birth relatives. Our support for adoptive families and our care and professionalism at each stage of the adoption process significantly enhance the success of our work and ensure particularly low disruption rates. **Just see what our adopters have to say about us...**

“A friendly welcome when I first rang and someone who could answer my questions straightaway”

“I always know that I can contact SFCS if I need help”

“It was so useful to hear other people’s experiences and know we’re not alone”

“Very thorough, excellent training programme”

We really hope that you find all the information within this pack helpful. But please do not hesitate to contact us at any time if you have any queries or just want to talk to someone.

If you require any of the information to be provided in another format then please let us know and we will do our best to meet any individual needs you may have.

2 WHO ARE THE CHILDREN WHO NEED ADOPTION?

- > Most children who need adoption have had very troubled early years. They may have been physically, emotionally or sexually abused, they may have been neglected. They may have lived in an environment where there was violence or substance misuse. These children may have lived with a number of carers. They need adoptive parents who can offer them a family for life where they are loved, protected and encouraged to achieve their full potential.
- > Today, around 2,000 adoptions per year are for children who are 'looked after' by the Local Authority, also called 'children in care'. Less than 200 babies a year are voluntarily relinquished by their mothers.
- > SFCS's main task is to recruit families who can adopt children who are in the care of the Local Authorities throughout Britain. **We are especially committed to finding families for those children who wait longest in the care system** before finding adoptive families. This includes children **over the age of 4**, children from **black and ethnic minority backgrounds**, **siblings** and children with **additional needs**.
- > Adoption today is not about providing couples with 'uncomplicated' babies. It is about finding all kinds of families for children of all ages with challenging backgrounds and complex needs.
- > For many children there is some ongoing contact (often letter contact via the adoption agency) with family members such as brothers and sisters from whom the children may have been separated.
- > Adopting a child is a life changing decision. You should enjoy the company of children. You need to have the capacity to understand a child's behaviour and feelings, and be able to accept the child's history.

Adopted children's early experiences often cause deep-set confusion, fear and anger and so they can struggle with relationships and day-to-day life. This can lead to behaviour which is, initially, difficult to understand.

Love alone cannot always heal the hurt.

Traditional parenting techniques are often unsuitable for adopted children – imagine how frightening 'time out' would be for a child who had experienced neglect.

Adoptive parenting works to restore unmet development needs and heal trauma.

Adopted children need love, understanding and patience to help them overcome their difficulties and go on to lead confident, happy lives – something often referred to as '**therapeutic parenting**'.

Adoption UK - <https://www.adoptionuk.org/FAQs/a-different-kind-of-parenting>

(Please note: SFCS does not deal with inter-country adoptions or adoptions by relatives.)

Some stories of children who are awaiting adoption

(The identities of these children have been changed to protect them)

DYLAN (aged 6)

Dylan is an active little boy, who can be demanding but very rewarding to care for. Since moving in with his foster carer 5 months ago, there has been a marked improvement in Dylan's behaviours at school and his attendance time is gradually increasing. It is envisaged he will be attending full time by the last few weeks of the summer term.

Dylan has minor facial features which could be a reflection of maternal alcohol/substance misuse in pregnancy, but there is no formal Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) diagnosis made at this stage.

Dylan is described as an affectionate, cheerful and thoughtful little boy. He takes pride in his appearance, and likes to dress nicely.



CAITLIN (aged 5)

Caitlin is a happy little girl who loves to sing and dance. She has made lots of progress since entering care, and responds more appropriately to firm boundaries, although she can still try to push these at times. Caitlin sometimes can have mood swings, being calm and happy one minute and then appearing withdrawn or angry for usually no apparent reason but it has become clear that Caitlin responds better to 1:1 attention.

Caitlin can show affection however this is often on her terms. Caitlin has been diagnosed with avoidant attachment disorder, which may explain why she will only show affection when she wants. It has been recommended that Caitlin should access some form of attachment therapy based support in the future.



RYAN (aged 3)

Ryan is a happy little boy who enjoys being active and busy. Ryan has difficulty in giving eye contact to people and finds it difficult to communicate his wishes to his carers. Ryan needs to be placed in a highly stimulating and nurturing environment.

Ryan has made remarkable progress in a relatively short period of time and adoptive parents would need to recognise this and celebrate the progress he will continue to make, but at his pace. Adopters will need to be patient and realistic. In addition they would also need to be able to promote sibling contact, particularly direct contact with his siblings in other adoptive placements.



AMELIA (aged 5), TYLER (aged 4) & TOMMY (aged 2)

Amelia, Tyler and Tommy are in need of a two parent family.

Amelia has experienced instability and poor parenting throughout her life, which impacted negatively on her emotional and behavioural development. She was observed to exhibit anxiety and increased difficulty in her behaviour in relation to her mother's unreliability. Since being in foster care, Amelia has presented as less anxious and challenging in her behaviour. She is lively and interested in the world around her, and enjoys learning new things. She is a bright child who enjoys school.



Tyler is generally a happy, content child, who laughs often and plays well. Tyler enjoys interacting with other children and adults, although he is shy with unfamiliar people. He has a sensitive nature, and can become overly upset when being disciplined, although he is easily comforted.

Tommy is a happy, content child. He has made a good attachment to his foster carer, and holds good eye contact and responds well to facial expressions by copying and babbling.

Tommy will cry when distressed, for example having a soiled nappy or needing food, and responds to unfamiliar people by crying and looking to his carer for reassurance. However, Tommy is easily comforted when he is upset.

LUCAS (aged 6) & LILLY (aged 4)

Lucas and Lilly are full siblings who need to be placed together.

Lucas has experienced hurt and rejection in his early years, therefore he is a sensitive child, with low self-esteem. He is a child who feels he needs to be in control to get his needs met, however he can respond when firm boundaries are in place. He struggles to verbalise his feelings, and due to his experiences of rejection can often avoid processing his emotions. He needs very patient adopters who will help him with this. Lucas is a very rewarding child who is great company; he is a child that you will need to invest in, but has so much potential to love and achieve.

Lilly is a happy and sociable little girl who is obsessed with the film 'Frozen.' She responds in a positive manner towards her foster carer and seeks regular comfort and reassurance from her. There may be an increased chance that Lilly may have emotional difficulties due to the neglectful care that she received when at home with birth parents. However, at this present time there is no evidence of this. Lilly has been found to have a chromosomal abnormality which takes the form of a deletion at chromosome 15q11.2. Children who have this deletion are likely to be at risk of developmental problems in the future and it is important that adopters are able to accept future uncertainty.



3 THE ROUTE TO ADOPTION

Becoming an adoptive parent



What is adoption?

Adoption is a way of providing new families for children who for various reasons can no longer be brought up within their birth families. It is a legal process and involves the transfer of all parental responsibilities to the adopter. The process leads to the granting of an Adoption Order through the courts when the child loses all legal ties with the birth family and becomes a full member of the adoptive family.

SFCS actively recruits adopters who are likely to meet the needs of children most urgently waiting for adoption.

However, we also welcome enquiries from those who are in the early stages of considering whether adoption may be the right route for them. **If in doubt, why not contact us?**

There are numerous adoption agencies in the UK. Many are run by local authorities, whilst others are Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs), independent of local authorities. St Francis' Children's Society is a VAA. Information about all adoption agencies can be obtained from First4Adoption at <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/find-an-adoption-agency/>

SFCS is not registered to provide a service to applicants who wish to adopt children from abroad (inter-country adoption) but enquirers can obtain information about agencies that will work in this area by contacting the Intercountry Adoption Centre on **0208 447 4753**.

Who can adopt?

We are looking for lots of different families for all kinds of children. However, the following points will be considered during your assessment:

Age

You need to be at least 21 years old to adopt.

Although there is no upper age limit, being an adoptive parent is demanding and you need to be fit and able to provide a stable home for a child into adulthood and beyond. Your age will be considered in relation to the age of the child(ren) you wish to adopt.

Personal status

There are no fixed criteria for this. You can adopt if you are single, married, in a civil partnership, living in a permanent relationship or divorced.

Faith and beliefs

SFCS works positively with individuals of any or no religious faith and will always seek to respect an individual's position.

Race, culture, language

SFCS welcomes applications from individuals of all ethnic backgrounds and works hard to celebrate the diversity and difference found in society today. Wherever possible we will aim to place children in a family which reflects their race, culture, religion and language.



Domicile

Applicants need to have their permanent home in the UK and if you are not a British National then you must have official permission to remain in the UK indefinitely.

Children

If you have been undergoing IVF, you should have completed any investigations or treatments before you make a formal application. We usually recommend that people in this situation take some time to adjust to the impact of this process before actively pursuing adoption. However, you may very well want to meet with us to talk about adoption as part of your considerations regarding how far to pursue infertility investigations. We are very willing to meet with people at an early stage in their deliberations.



If you have children already, we will very much take into account their needs as well as those of the child who may be placed in your family. There must be a minimum age gap of 2 years (although more is preferable) between the youngest child living in your home and any child to be placed for adoption.

We particularly welcome applications from those with children who have reached their teenage years or indeed may have left home, where you may feel you have more capacity to welcome other children into your family.

Childcare experience

An important part of becoming an adoptive parent is acquiring significant and relevant experience of caring for children who are in the same age range that you're hoping to adopt. You could volunteer with groups such as Family Centres, local Brownie or Cub packs, football clubs, schools or nurseries. We will seek references from the childcare provider you volunteer with.

Health

Applicants need to be fit enough to care for a child throughout his or her childhood. All applicants are required to have a medical examination. This will include questions about your physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Lifestyle issues including weight, smoking and alcohol consumption will be taken into account in considering your overall physical health. We follow the guidelines of CoramBAAF, which state that children under 5 years

should not be placed within a smoking household. It is recommended that potential applicants who are smokers seek advice from their GP to stop smoking. It is also recommended that you should have stopped smoking at least 6 months before formally applying to become an approved adopter.

We ask that you share details of any medical issues with us as early as possible so that we may clarify those with our Medical Adviser.

Support networks

Adopting a child is a hugely rewarding thing to do. However, it can also be challenging. You will need a stable and robust support network around you. Your network may include family, friends, community groups, neighbours and colleagues. It is these people who will be asked for your personal references.

Criminal convictions, cautions or enquiries pending

If an applicant has a criminal conviction it may still be possible for them to adopt. However, we are seeking to find safe families for vulnerable children, and as such, anyone who has committed certain criminal offences (especially those crimes which are violent) and anyone who has committed offences against children will not be eligible to adopt. Those same restrictions may apply to anyone who is within your household and may need to be considered if they are applicable to someone in your immediate family.

You will be required to give us details of any allegations, cases pending or convictions at the earliest possible stage, so that we can consider these and advise you accordingly.

In any event, all those applying to adopt and members of their household over the age of 18, will be required to undergo a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check.

Pets

We appreciate that for many applicants, a domestic animal or pet may be an important part of the household. You must inform us if you have animals in the home. We ask that pets are fully supervised when SFCS staff visit your home, to ensure staff safety. A pet assessment will be required to assess any health and safety implications for children who may join your family.



The adoption process

Adoption is a lifelong commitment with huge challenges and huge rewards. However, it needs to be right for you, your family, and of course, for children – both now and in the future.

The process of assessing and preparing adoptive parents is understandably a rigorous one. In this way we can increase the likelihood of adoption being successful for you and the children, and we can minimise the risk of things going wrong.

SFCS has an excellent record of 'getting it right'. We will ask a lot of you, but we will offer a lot to you in return.

On the next page, you will see a step-by-step overview of the adoption Process. (We also publish a more detailed breakdown of this process. If you would like a copy, please just ask.)

4 THE ADOPTION PROCESS: STEP-BY-STEP

STEP 1: Start the process... Get in touch with SFCS via phone, email or at www.sfcs.org.uk, or join us at one of our regular information events. You will receive our comprehensive **adoption information pack**.



STEP 2: Full referral and Registration of Interest... If you are ready to proceed, a full **referral** is taken over the phone. We will then arrange to **visit** you to discuss your interest further and to do a **Health & Safety check** on your home. If you still wish to proceed, we will ask you to complete a **Registration of Interest form**. If, based on the information you provide us with, we feel unable to progress your application, the reasons will be fully explained to you.



STEP 3: Meet your social worker... On receipt of your Registration of Interest form, you will be **allocated a social worker**, who will contact you to discuss the next stage.

ENTER STAGE 1 – REFERENCES AND CHECKS

STEP 4: Let's begin... When you are ready to proceed, you will be asked to sign the **Stage 1 Agreement**, which sets out the working relationship between you and SFCS.



STEP 5: Training starts... During Stage 1, you will be asked to attend four full days of **Preparation Training** at SFCS. If you are part of a couple, you will both be required to attend the full course. We aim for all applicants to attend this training Stage 1 but recognise that, due to the timing of the groups and individual availability, this may not always be possible. In these circumstances, the training will need to take place during Stage 2.

If you don't already have the required **childcare experience**, you will need to make arrangements for volunteering with appropriate organisations in your local area. This will need to be in place by the end of Stage 1.



STEP 6: Statutory checks... Meanwhile, **statutory checks** will be carried out, including DBS checks, medicals and personal references.



STEP 7: Ready for Stage 2...? Once the statutory checks have been completed, your social worker will establish with you whether you are ready to enter the next stage...

Stage 1 should be completed in 2 months, unless you require more time due to unforeseen circumstances. Please note that this time frame will also rely on your statutory checks being received by SCFS. Then it's on to Stage 2...

ENTER STAGE 2 – THE HOME STUDY PROCESS

STEP 8: Training continues... Stage 2 is an **in-depth assessment** to prepare you for the task of becoming an adoptive parent. If you were unable to attend the Preparation Training in Stage 1, you will be asked to attend it now. During this assessment period, you will be asked to consider if you would like to adopt via the **early permanence process** - please see **The Triangle Project** page for further information.



STEP 9: Homestudy... Your social worker will **visit you at home** approximately six times. These visits will typically last two hours each, although this may vary. The discussions will focus on your current situation, your lifestyle, relationships, values, interests, hopes and expectations. We will reflect with you on your experience of growing up and of previous relationships. We will consider your knowledge of and experience with children. All this information will help us to **assess your ability to parent an adoptive child**.



STEP 10: Time to review... A review of your homestudy preparation will usually be held by an adoption manager towards the end of your assessment. This is known as a **Second Opinion visit**. The completed assessment is referred to as the **Prospective Adopter Report (PAR)**.

We aim to complete your assessment within four months of your application being accepted.



STEP 11: Adoption panel... If and when your assessment is complete, SFCS will decide whether to recommend your approval as adopters. If the assessment is positive, you and your social worker will present your **PAR** to the **SFCS Adoption Panel**.



STEP 12: Decision time... A **recommendation** is made by the Adoption Panel as to whether you are suitable to adopt, and the **SFCS Decision Maker** will make the final decision.

If you are successful, the search for the right child for you will begin...

5 EARLY PERMANENCE: THE TRIANGLE PROJECT

Are you interested in exploring a different route to adoption? Could you offer an early permanence placement to a vulnerable child?

Early permanence is the term given to placements intended to speed up a child's journey through care and minimise the disruption of repeated moves to different families. Early permanence allows children to be placed with approved adopters who have also been approved as foster carers, enabling the children to experience a loving, settled and secure home as quickly as possible.



Why early permanence?

When a child can't live with their birth family, local authorities and the courts are responsible for finding a new family without delay. Children cannot wait.

But children in care **do** wait. All available options for the child's care must be fully explored before a decision is made to seek adopters. In most cases, during this time the child lives with foster carers. Foster carers do a wonderful and vital job, but children usually only stay with them temporarily while their future is decided. Quite often, children experience a number of temporary placements, which can be disruptive and distressing.

In early permanence placements, children are **fostered by the people who are likely to become their adopters** at an early stage, reducing the likelihood of multiple temporary placements. This decreases uncertainty for children by reducing the number of moves they experience and the trauma associated with this upheaval.

The Triangle Project

SFCS is now able to offer placements to early permanence carers through The Triangle Project, which is an independent fostering agency, rated 'Good' by Ofsted.

Triangle Project 

The Triangle Project is a partnership between **SFCS** and **Adoption Focus**, both successful and experienced adoption agencies. The Triangle Project trains, prepares, assesses and approves early permanence carers for vulnerable children. We work with potential parents, helping them to become **dual-approved** as both:

- **foster carers**, approved through the Triangle Project fostering agency and...
- **adopters**, approved through either Adoption Focus or SFCS, depending on the adopter's geographical location.

If you would like to explore this alternative route to adoption, please ask to see our special leaflet, visit www.triangleproject.org.uk or call **0300 303 3707**.

6 ADOPTION SUPPORT SERVICES

Here at St Francis' Children's Society, we believe that the impact of adoption is lifelong – for those who become adoptive parents; for children and young people who are adopted; and for birth families who lose children to adoption.

We aim therefore to provide a whole range of services which can be accessed by anyone whose life has been touched by adoption through SFCS.

We are well known nationally for having a long established tradition of developing adoption support services; for many adopters, these services are the key reason they choose SFCS as the best adoption agency for them.



Our services are available to you as and when you want to use them. They include:

- > Regular **social and support events** for adoptive children and their families, offering opportunities to meet other adoptive parents, enjoy family time and to keep in touch with SFCS staff.
- > Useful **workshops and seminars** which help adoptive parents keep in touch with old and new ways of tackling difficult issues.
- > A first point of contact. We are committed to providing a **listening ear, advice and support** to adoptive families at any time. We may agree ourselves to undertake a specific piece of work with you, or look to identify an external organisation which could offer you the support you need, in discussion with the Local Authority.
- > **Consultation appointments** with a therapist and adoption support worker to discuss any concerns or issues within the adoptive home.
- > A **Buddy scheme** which puts prospective adopters in touch with existing adopters who understand what they're going through
- > A **therapeutic parenting workshop programme** run over a number of weeks with an experienced trainer and one of the adoption support team.
- > An excellent **library** with relevant books, articles and videos which families can borrow. Adopters are welcome to call in at any time.
- > A **monthly E-News**, to help you maintain a connection with SFCS and keep you up to date with our latest news and support services.

7 AN ADOPTER'S VIEW

Andy and Jackie became parents to 7-year-old Jenny in 2014, using the Adoption Connections service at SFCS.*

** All names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality.*

Jenny was placed with us in October 2014 at the age of 7½. Because of her age, she was considered 'hard to adopt'.

We met her at an Exchange Day. That's an event where local authorities from all over the country display (on posters and videos), the children in their care to approved adopters. It was a very emotional experience and we left there with 24 profiles of children who matched our criteria. Trying to get that number down to something more manageable was incredibly hard.

I remember asking one social worker there why one 4-year-old girl who seemed to be a perfect match hadn't been adopted yet. It was a stark reminder of the plight of older children in care through no fault of their own, when she replied "because of her age".

Fortunately, Jenny had a very proactive 'family finder' who felt that, in us, she had found Jenny's parents. A few days later, we received her reports. Her core assessment was a 4-page summary of how she came to end up in care. It was horrible to read what she'd been through and I had to stop reading part way through it for a break. I later found out that the full report was 100 pages long.



I think this was the moment when my thoughts of what our family would look like took shape; suddenly our daughter now had a name and a face.

A few months later, we attended the matching panel in her home authority. That was probably the most nervous I had been throughout the whole process. There had been an awful lot of ups and downs, but we had now invested an awful lot in Jenny. The panel said 'yes', and then the hard work really began.

Continued overleaf...

In October 2014, we were walking up to the foster carer's door. I had imagined this first meeting for ages. What would her reaction be? What if she doesn't like us? I needn't have worried; when the door opened, she simply said, "Hello daddy", and came and gave me a big hug.



Our lives have changed immeasurably since then. There was a life before adoption and a life after. We used to get lay-ins, have lazy days, and generally do whatever we wanted. Now our focus is her. We see the world through her eyes, and delight in her successes. She frustrates us with her stubborn streak one minute, then makes us laugh the next. She loves going swimming or out on bike rides, and we love taking her.

She seldom talks about her life before she went into care. She certainly remembers it, but doesn't yet want or feel the need to talk about it. The few times the subject has come up have occasionally resulted in tears, but we feel equipped to support her.

We thought that adopting an older child would mean we had missed out on a lot. However, we've still had a lot of 'firsts', including some we didn't expect. We were the first ones to take her to the zoo, the cinema, hold a birthday party. Even going to a toy shop was a new experience for her.

She has made outstanding progress since she started living with us. Her teachers are as delighted as we are and she has managed to make good inroads into catching up with her peers. Challenges lie ahead, but what parent could say otherwise?

8 YOUNG PEOPLE TALKING



When asked, what **difference** adoption makes to the lives of adopted children...

"I feel special because I am adopted"

"the parents who adopted us really love us and care for us. We have new cousins, uncles and aunts who love us and we have lots of fun with them and they make us feel safe."

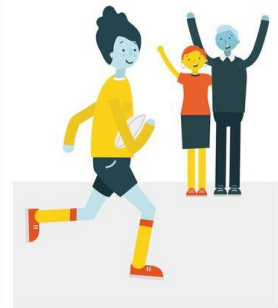
"My experience of adoption is amazing"

I love my family to bits and, alright some of the time people make fun out of you for being adopted, but at the end of the day you were chosen to go live with the people and you are no different to anyone else. You should never see it as a bad thing. **Just love life."**



"When your birth family don't know how to look after you, someone will find you a forever family who will adopt and look after you. I wish my birth family would have looked after me better, but now

I've got a family who will look after me."



"I have a Mum and Dad who love me and want the best for me.

They look after me and make sure I have food to eat and clean clothes. They take me to my sporting clubs and watch me play."

"I was adopted when I was 5 and now I am 14, from what I remember what I like the most is to be part of a family knowing that, even when my new parents are a pain in the backside sometimes, they are always there for me and I feel loved and safe."



**We hope you have found this information pack useful.
If you feel the time is right for you to take your first
steps towards becoming an adoptive parent, we hope
you'll get in touch... no pressure, no obligation.**

St. Francis' Children's Society

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