

# A WISH LIST

Helen Oakwater

## INTRODUCTION

*“Never criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his moccasins”.*  
American Indian Proverb

I wish adoption didn't exist. Don't get me wrong. I am an adoptive parent and I love my children passionately, they have brought enormous joy and enlightenment into my life. Adopting them is the best thing I have ever done and I have no regrets.

But I wish they, and others like them had never needed to be adopted. Why? Because my children, like many others, had a hard time in their first few years. Their birth parents had a painful time and adoptive parents have difficult times.

Adoption is based on loss, pain and negative experiences. Children lose an entire blood family. Birth parents are bereaved of a child or children. Adopters often have issues of infertility or have lost children prior to their birth. From each participant's position in the adoption triangle come shattered hopes and dreams, fantasies, illusions and reoccurring grief. So lets not kid ourselves, adoption is tough for each person affected.

We need to acknowledge the extent of these tragic circumstances so that we can start from where an individual is - not where we would like them to be. Adoption support is often lacking where it is really needed. Why? Perhaps because often we don't want to shine a light into the dark sinister places where abuse, neglect and trauma live. We vainly hope that moving a child to a nice new family will solve the child's problems, undo all the early damage and they'll all live happily ever after. If an adoption breaks down, we sometimes hear the phrase, "it was the wrong family". We wonder that some birth mothers just keep producing children who are all subsequently adopted. We don't ask ourselves "Why do they do that"?

We look at children, birth parents and adopters, passing judgement and opinion while looking through our own window on the world. Each of us is unique. We've each learned lessons in life through our own eyes, ears and minds. We digest information, experiences, and traumas differently. We filter sounds, colours and feelings differently. Our view of reality is like a map and we each have our own unique map of the world.

Recognising that there are maps of the world that look very different to your own, is the first step in making sense of experiences - yours or others. Until we acknowledge honour and respect the reality of the Birth Parent, Adopter and Child, we are not in a position to understand them, help them, or to provide the appropriate resources for them.

We seldom offer adoption support in a form that is palatable to the recipients, because we don't stand in their shoes and see the world through their eyes. We try to plant our map on their world. We judge, we presume, we assume. We rarely listen wholeheartedly.

Children placed for adoption have often had horrendous experience; many of which we don't know about, either as social work professionals, therapists or parents. But the child knows. Every experience is remembered and has moulded their view of the world. They will remember when their tummy ached with hunger, or being terrified in the dark, or the smell of

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stale beer, or the voice that knots their stomach, or the taste of curdled milk, or the throbbing in their head from the shouting, or the dry throat needing water or the sheer hell of being alone and unloved for days - but they will also remember the scent, smile or touch of their birth mother.

Sometimes the child's map is fragmented. A child living with a drug-abusing mother will have two mothers - a good one and a bad one, depending on her state. How does a very young child make sense of a woman who is sometimes very caring and loving and sometimes abusive and neglectful?

These children don't have the rose tinted glasses we often wear when looking at them. They have wacky glasses that distort images and focus on the unexpected. Their survival strategies have resulted in a hypersensitivity to other people's behavioural cues that are missed by the vast majority of us.

Birth Parents sometimes had these dreadful experiences in their own childhood or, through substance abuse, are unable to see or understand the damage they are inadvertently inflicting on their children.

Adopters generally start with high expectations and hopes. As time flies by, the reality can arrive like a slap in the face, which knocks off the rose tinted specs. Flexibility is essential - so that adopters can help their child make sense of their early life by recognising and respecting their child's view of the world.

## THE WISH LIST

This chapter is intended to paint a picture and tell the story of the three sets of individuals who stand at each corner of the adoption triangle.

Birth Parent,  
Adoptive Parent,  
Child.

We will try to look through their eyes into their world, hear their story and discover some of their feelings and wishes. We can't change the stories that have led to adoption but adoption support could go a long way to making those wishes come true.

The wish list contains three different types of wishes.

- One set is simply individual thoughts and wishes about particular aspects of adoption.
- *Another set is based on a specific adoption issue or event where each participant's position is laid out, so the same scenario is seen from three different perspectives. These are printed in italics.*
- The concluding set are hopes, wishes and dreams that would make a huge difference to all those involved in the adoption process

Topics have been grouped together in no significant order for ease of reading.

Some readers may find that the words become more real if read aloud or by changing the tone, accent or pitch of the voice. Try playing with these ideas - you might be surprised at what pops up.

If, while reading, you find yourself laughing or crying then congratulations; you have stepped into someone else's map of the world. Enjoy the view and the learning therein.

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*“Until you walk a mile in another man's moccasins you can't imagine the smell”.*  
Robert Byrne

## **I just don't understand**

**Birth Parent** I wish I still had Shamus. The social workers said I didn't look after him properly, that I didn't see to his needs. She didn't listen when I said I changed his nappy every day. I only left him alone for an hour. He was asleep. He was in a cot; if he'd woken he couldn't go anywhere. So what if he cried - it wouldn't harm him. All babies cry a lot, it doesn't hurt them. She said the place was dirty and messy and the floor needed cleaning. So what; I didn't put my son on the floor, he stayed in the cot, that way he's always safe. She said Shamus needed to interact more with me. We watched the TV together. She said he needed other children to play with, but I told her he'd catch colds from them. She said he needed more toys to play with. I don't see why, he had loads of teddies to play with. She said I had to imagine how things looked, sounded and felt for Shamus. She said Butch, the German Shepherd Dog, was frightening Shamus. I told her his barking protected us from the local gangs who thump our door. She said I couldn't look after him properly that 'in his best interest' he was being 'taken into care'. Why? I care for him just fine. She said that, on balance, he needed adopting because I would never be able to care for him properly. That I couldn't put his needs before my own. I know that all he needed was me, his Mum. I cared for him the best I could. I wanted Shamus so much. I loved him so much. I needed him to love me. It tore me apart when they took him away forever. There is emptiness inside where his love for me should be. It will be better next time. The baby growing inside me now will fill the gap that Shamus left. This time I'll keep my baby, because we both need each other.

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**Child** I wish I wasn't frightened of big dogs. At 14 and 6 foot tall it's pathetic.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Adopter** I wish I knew why he lied. At lunch Benji told me I'd hit him at breakfast. I shouted at him when he dropped his bowl, but I've never laid a finger on him, I was on the opposite side of the room. But he believes I hit him. Why does he do that?

\*\*\*\*\*

**Child** I wish I knew why I was scared of water and swimming.

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**Birth Parent** *I wish I knew why the police smashed the door down and then ripped Frank out of my arms. I was so scared. Frank and I were both screaming and shaking.*

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Child *I wish I didn't jump so much at the sound of a loud bang. Other kids laugh at me and call me a saddo . Sometimes afterwards I shake. Sometimes I just scream. Its freaky and I hate it.*

Adopter *I wish Frank was like the other boys in his class. I wish he'd just realise that hitting classmates is not a successful strategy for making friends. I've told him often enough. He just doesn't listen. He's now the class bully. I can't understand why he keeps doing it as it makes him unhappy too.*

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Child I wish the smell of bleach didn't make me retch. It doesn't do that to anyone else I know. I wonder why that is?

\*\*\*\*\*

Birth Parent I wish I could see Louis. Why can't I see him after he's adopted. I saw him twice a week when he was fostered. After all, I am his Mum.

### **If I'd known then what I know now**

Adopter I wish I'd pumped the Social Workers for every fact and bit of information about his life. If we'd known the truth we would have done it differently. He'd still be my son and I'd have been a better parent because I would have understood him more.

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Child I wish I'd understood why.....Oh, I don't know what.

\*\*\*\*\*

Adopter I wish I'd known about attachment disorder earlier. Looking back on it, Patrick had so many symptoms when he was 6. He shaved the guinea pig. He lied about ridiculous things that didn't matter to anyone. He wanted to control everything and everyone. It was exhausting. We were told he was hyper active. We were asked to manage his behaviour better - star charts were suggested frequently. One teacher, when he was 6, wanted him suspended. Maybe if we'd received some support or some decent therapy or had an understanding ear, things would be different and he might still be at home.

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Child I wish I'd been adopted sooner.

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Adopter I wish I'd known about the long-term effect of abuse and neglect. I spent years believing it was my fault and I was a bad parent.

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Birth Parent I wish I'd realised how much my drinking hurt them. I'd have given up the booze much sooner. They might be with me now if I'd stopped then.

\*\*\*\*\*

Adopter I wish I'd understood that my children were incapable of reciprocal love. I did everything I could - almost destroyed myself in the process, and yet they don't care about me at all, never have. I wiped their noses and their bottoms, always put their needs first. The marriage didn't survive; we were always at crisis point, never any time for ourselves. I have three children - one son in prison for GBH, one daughter who has two children of her own, both in care; and my youngest, is a drug addict who I've not seen, or heard from, for 18 months.

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Their first few years were so awful - nobody could have parented them without huge amounts of therapy and help. We got none however much we asked. They even made us pay for foster care when at 14, Amy refused to live at home or go to school. We were punished for someone else's crimes. What advice would I give to prospective adopters now - be very, very careful and get support agreements in writing. Don't trust anything the Authorities say.

## Feelings and thoughts I wish I didn't have

*Child I think about her every day - I wonder if she thinks about me. Has she forgotten me?*

*Adopter I think about her every day - I wonder if she thinks about us?*

*Birth Parent I think about her every day - I wonder if she thinks about me. Has she forgotten me?*

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*Birth Parent I wish I knew what my kids thought of me. I'm sure they hate me. Sometimes I hate me.*

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*Child I was a bad baby. That's why she gave me away.*

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*Birth Parent My son was stolen from me by Social Services.*

*Child My adoptive parents stole me from my real Mum and Dad.*

*Adopter He steals from me the whole time. Sometimes I want to hurt my son the way he is hurting me. He has no reason to threaten me, hit me or steal my things. Some days I fear for my life.....or my sanity.*

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*Child My Dad hated me, that's why he hit me so much. I wish I wasn't so horrible*

## The rest of the world

*Birth Parent I'm glad she went to a white family, she'll have a better life with them than a black family.*

*Child I wish I looked like my Mum and Dad. Being adopted is bad enough, being a different colour makes it worse. On my fifth birthday when I blew out the candles I wished that my hair would be like Mummy's. My Mum does her best but my hair still doesn't look right.*

*Adopter I wish I could braid her hair better, my hair is straight and mousy, so don't have years of experience braiding afro hair. It takes all day, hurts her and I hate that. I can't help her with make up and don't know which beauty products work best. Last week I bought a foundation, which being too dark, made her look like Al Jolson; fortunately she saw the funny side and made me wear it too. We danced round the kitchen, doing our best Black and White Minstrel impression and laughed like drains. It was funny, but it did hurt.*

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Adopter I wish I could tell the other Year 5 Mothers at school that, in his former life, my son survived repeated rapes, regular beatings and was in constant fear for his life. At Nursery he used to sit in the corner howling for hours, pull out his hair and flinch if you touched him. So what if he calls out in class and wanders around at bit. I am so proud of him, but I can't tell any one why. They just think he's the class nuisance.

\*\*\*\*\*

Child I wish people knew how much I'd been through. I am now an average child. I'm getting okay grades at school - national average in my SATs. I'm patrol leader in Scouts, on the school football team; I have mates, argue (a bit) with my parents, hate broccoli, tuna and purple. But I didn't start off like this. I had a really bad start. My birth parents hurt me. I used to behave really badly and was scared of loads of things. I've done lots of therapy, which was really hard sometimes, but it has helped with the nightmares. But I can't tell my mates coz only weirdos do therapy and I'm not telling them about the abuse, they wouldn't understand and I'd die of shame if they knew. My Mum and Dad are the only ones who know how hard it's been for me and how far I've come. I'm quite proud of myself.

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Adopter I wish I had a pound for every time someone told me that my son's behaviour is normal. It's not.

\*\*\*\*\*

Birth Parent I wish there was someone to share stuff with, who would understand. I can't tell anyone that my children were taken from me and adopted. I know that back then when I was a drunk I neglected them. But now I'm sober, in a different town, living an okay life and holding down a job. I've got a new set of friends who are great, but I could never tell them I'm a mother. I am so ashamed of having my two children adopted. Sometimes the pain, shame and self-hatred is all too much and I think about ending it forever. I cry for hours knowing I'm a terrible person.

\*\*\*\*\*

Adopter I wish other parents at school would make some allowances for Darren. He doesn't get invited back for tea after school. I know he finds making friends difficult and he can get very over excited, but we've had nearly all the boys in his class back here for tea at some point this term. The other parents just won't reciprocate. Some Mums often have coffee after drop off. They have never invited me. That really hurts. They know Darren is adopted and has been with us less than a year, yet not one has approached me. Yesterday one woman came to talk to me, but she only wanted to tell me that Darren had hit her daughter in the playground. I just wanted to cry.

## Where are they now?

Child I wish I was safe. I am terrified that one day the doorbell will ring and my Birth Father will have found me. I sometimes think I catch a fleeting glimpse of him from the car, or I hear a voice that sounds just like him. Yesterday on the way home from school I stood at the bus stop and I smelt him. I turned, it wasn't him, but it could have been. I started to shake and my mates laughed.

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Child I wonder if she had any more babies after me and my sister? I wish I knew.

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Child I wish I knew if my older brothers who went into foster care are okay. They should be taking their GCSE's now. I know they still see Mum, which is why I can't see them, but I really want to know if they are okay. Brendan was always so good to me, he used to pull funny faces and swing me to make me laugh. I wonder if he's going to College or got a job? At night I imagine he might be dead, then I pull the covers over my head and silently sob so no one hears me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Birth Parent I wish I knew where she was. The telly and papers are full of the story about the girl who has disappeared and the police are searching for her. She is the same age as my Anna. They could have changed her name, it might be her. Every time there's a story about a girl whose been lost, taken or died, my heart pounds. Just for a second I think it's Anna, I catch my breath, look carefully and work out the age and check the hair colour. A moment of pure joy as I realise its not her, then immediately I feel so guilty. How can I be so heartless, a family has lost a daughter, how could I feel happy about it. I know how much that hurts.

\*\*\*\*\*

Child The annual letter arrived from my Mum today. Phew that was a relief, it's a bit late this year, I thought she might be dead or have forgotten me. My stomach was churning before I read it. I'm never quite sure what she might say. She used to say stuff that really worried me. She says she's okay and trying to find a job. The paper felt really thin and her spelling is awful. It wasn't her fault she didn't go to school properly and has no qualifications. Mum and I talked about it, snuggled up on the sofa. She said (as always) how my birth Mum didn't really stand a chance of ever looking after me properly, that she was a little girl in a woman's body and probably always would be. We talked and cried about all the yucky stuff that happened to me when I was little, and how we both wished it had been different.

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Adopter I wish that bloody woman could realise how much she hurts Charlotte by forgetting to send a birthday card. I put up with Charlotte's anger and disappointment for the next few weeks while she rips up books, scrawls over posters and says she doesn't care. Then at bedtime I hold her while she sobs and repairs her broken heart.

## Direct Contact

*Adopter I wish I could tell the self satisfied Mothers at the Coffee Morning that I'm edgy, uptight and anxious because tomorrow my children will be having a face-to-face meeting with their birth mother. The first time in seven years. She may not turn up, or turn up drunk, or sob throughout or be completely coherent and nice. I have no idea how anyone will react to any of this or to anything else. I am terrified. I just can't envisage how Carli and Desmond will respond on the day or afterwards. Will they want her not me?*

*Birth Parent I wish I hadn't agreed to see them. I'm sure they'll hate me. After seven years they won't remember me. Why did I agree? .....Because I miss them so much it hurts... every day it hurts...and I can't tell any one. I just want to know they are okay, to smell them; to see the sunlight bounce off their hair the way it did in the hospital. I'm terrified that tomorrow I'll breakdown or bottle out.*

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Carli *I wish it were over. I can't really believe it; I'm seeing my birth mum tomorrow, first time since I was tiny. I keep thinking about her. What will she be wearing, what colour will her hair be, is it the same as mine? Will she like my new jeans, will she mind Mum being there, will she turn up, will she like me?*

Desmond *I'm not sure if I want to see her, I think I do and I think I don't. I don't know what I should think or feel.*

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Birth Parent I wish I could take them home afterwards and show them where I imagine them sleeping if they lived with me. They are still my babies.

\*\*\*\*\*

Child How could my birth mum lie to me like that. She said she'd stopped drinking - she reeked of alcohol, she was shaky and looked really old and ill. I wish she'd sort herself out.

\*\*\*\*\*

Adopter *Every time before I dread it, afterwards there is just the relief. It's over for another six months. Noli and Kris are less upset each time we see birth mum. I think they realise she can't look after them and that's not likely to change. Noli actually said that she didn't behave like a Mum, she behaved like a child. Amazing that at 10 he recognises it. Contact is such a reality check for the boys. They can see her with their own eyes, hear her words and feel their own emotional response to her. It may be tough, but I'm glad we do it. I just wish she had some more support. I'm sure she spends ages afterwards sobbing alone. She holds the boys so gently; I wish someone could hold her so tenderly.*

Birth Parent *I wish I could stop the pain in my belly that I have every time after I see Noli and Kris. They smell so good; I wish I could bottle it, like perfume and have a sniff every day. Every time I see them and they leave the room its like them being taken from me the first time. I hate it. I don't know if I can do it again.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Child I can't concentrate on anything at school, I keep thinking back to last week when I had contact with my older brothers who are in foster care. Dad is out of prison and wants to see me. Darren told me when we went to the toilet together. It was supposed to be a secret, the Social Workers asked them not to tell me, but they did. I wish he was still locked up, so I'd be safe.

## Dealing with the Authorities - "Them"

Adopter I wish they could see it from my angle. They just think I'm an over anxious, inadequate parent. I am sick of constantly battling and trying to get them to understand.

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Child I wish I could tell that teacher why this is so important to me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Birth Parent They've taken my kids, dragged me through the courts, lied about me and now they want me to give them photos of my babies -the only thing I have left of them - so they can do a life story book (what ever that is) for Marcus and Ayesha. I wish those Social Workers would just leave me alone.

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- Child I wish I had a safe place to run to when I start to lose it. That's why I run out of the gates - there is nowhere else to go.  
\*\*\*\*\*
- Adopter I am sick to death of explaining how this family is in a constant state of upheaval, anxiety and fear. AND IT'S NOT MY BLOODY FAULT, but will Social Services listen, will they heck. They think, its our poor parenting, we can't control our children. They are right, we can't, which is why we need their help. They think we are to blame - the years our kids spent hungry in a chaotic, filthy, slum surrounded by drug taking are blithely dismissed as irrelevant excuses. I wish I could make them listen. I feel so impotent.  
\*\*\*\*\*
- Birth Parent I wish they could, for just a moment, understand how I feel.  
\*\*\*\*\*
- Adopter I wish I had taped that phone call. The woman in the Health Trust wanted to know what percentage of Alexi's problems were health related. What percentage were school or social services related. Don't they get it? This is a child, not a theoretical model that can be broken down into easily divisible parts. I'm sorry that my son does not fit neatly into an organisational structure that's convenient for them. How disagreeable of him. How outrageous that I should want my child dealt with as an individual who is greater than the sum of his parts. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I'll probably do both.  
\*\*\*\*\*
- Adopter I wish they would help. They all agree he can't live at home (not that he wants to), is struggling at school (when he's there), and his mental health is wobbly (the self harming is increasing) and they agree he would benefit hugely from a place at a therapeutic boarding school. BUT they don't want to fund it and pass us round from one budget holder to the next. We go round and round in circles. Meanwhile he becomes more disturbed, his behaviour gets harder and harder to live with. I wish there was one person in the Local Authority who would fight for us and help us through this administrative nightmare.  
\*\*\*\*\*
- Child *I wish Mr Thomas hadn't asked us to bring in a picture of ourselves as a baby. I haven't got one. I so wish I had. All the other kids clucked over each other's photos. Saying 'Oh you haven't changed', 'what a sweet dress' and other sick making stuff. I said that all my baby photos, loads of them, were in my old house, which burned down. They didn't believe me. Not that I care. I was really angry - so I took sweets and money from people's pockets to make me feel better and them feel bad. It's not fair.*
- Adopter *I wish I could smack Mr Thomas from one side of the classroom to the other. I told him last month that sex education, birth and babyhood would bring up issues for Felicity. And yet, he gives me no prior warning that baby photos are to be displayed. He had the brass neck to tell me "It didn't matter if Felicity had no photo". I stood in front of him with my mouth gapping like a landed fish - how could he be so stupid and insensitive. It may not have mattered to him, but it is such a source of pain and sadness for her. As usual, the school just ignores what I say. They just think I'm an over anxious parent.*

## DREAM TIME – WISHES FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT

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This section integrates the wishes of each corner of the adoption triangle into realistic, practical, specific adoption support. These are SMART wishes. (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Timely). Each bullet point listed could be implemented within five years, some in five months, and others within five days.

This list could take up the whole book. It might appear to some, that more adoption support will give an unfair share of resources and provisions to adopted children and those who care for them. Please remember adoption support is about trying to neutralise the damage the child has experienced. It's levelling the playing field. It's about helping them to change their map of the world and repairing their core distortion. Unresolved damage festering inside a child will eventually explode outwards and harm all those in the blast zone. Adoption support is a necessity, not a luxury.

### **Money and Strategy**

- Adequate funds
- Some new funding for new provisions - more than just the same old money re-presented again and again and again as seems to happen with Quality Protects funding
- Strategic planning by the Government and Local Authorities for a generation, not for half a decade please - adoption is a life long issue.
- A real commitment to support adoptive families (the only family made by the state!) from placement through to 25 (not 18 or 21, because often adopted children are immature and reach real adulthood later than their peers)

### **The Child's Life**

- A life storybook for life, not a frill for placement. A life storybook that has more than a couple of photos, dates and fluffy prose. That has the real reasons children were adopted. Hard facts. The brutal truth. Dates, addresses, times. Photos that will help the child make sense of their experiences, validate their memories and by doing so allow the child to come to terms with their past and be comfortable in their own skin.
  - Photos that show the grubby things, the dirt, the squalor, the poverty, the lack of furniture, the soiled bed, the reality of a child's circumstances.
  - Photos that show the good times, the playground, the parties, the paddling pool, the birthday cake, the friends, the holidays, the sunshine and the laughter.
  - Photos that show the painful things, the police photos of bruises or broken bones, the hospital reports,
  - Photos of all the people who have been involved with the child; relatives, friends, culprits, perpetrators, teachers, victims, social workers, nurses
- All the schoolbooks, record cards, pictures drawn, certificates and stories written.
- A time line showing all significant events, including the day the child
  - took first step,
  - spoke first word - what was it and said to whom?
  - fell in a puddle,
  - was stung by a bee,
  - rode a bike without stabilisers.....into the pond in the park,
  - had goodbye visit with Mum,
  - went to the fair and was sick after too much candy floss,
  - bought first wellies,
  - lost first welly,

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- visited a farm with the school and was bitten by a billy goat,
- lost first tooth,
- first heard about new adoptive parents
- pushed a towel down the toilet flooding the bathroom floor,
- had vaccinations
- last visited Grandpa before he died,
- first paddle in sea,
- learned to write own name
- first speaking part in a school assembly,
- first time to swim a width, a length or 100m, or 400m, or 1km.

### **Information for the Child**

- Full audit trail of decisions, actions (or lack of them) made by authorities. The reasons should be stated clearly.
- Full details of birth family - medical, social, psychological, education, thoughts, hopes, beliefs, skills, quirks,
- Information must be accurate, neat, legible, understandable, correctly spelt, free from subjective opinion and evidenced. We all know the pressure social workers are under, but for a child to return to their records, say 15 years after placement, to find errors in their date of birth, their name spelt incorrectly and a sibling missing from their Form E is just unacceptable. Equally, hearsay should be clearly indicated. The phrase “it is thought...” should never appear. Who thinks it and why? The evidence must be there. A child, when reading these records and reports, should be allowed to form their own view of their history, from facts and evidenced opinion, not filtered through a Social Workers belief that “he won’t need to know this”. That information belongs to the child and no one has the right to tamper with it, deliberately or inadvertently.
- Access to all records from pre-birth to adoption. This information must be accessible when the child needs and wants it. Restricting access until legal adulthood prevents the child fitting fragments of their life together. Rather like a jigsaw, the fragments, memories and context need reprocessing to make sense of them. Delaying the facts simply causes confusion for the child. It’s often not new data, their mind and body already knows. The information allows them to reframe events and understand themselves better.
- Adult adoptees and their birth families need to know how to access this information and where to find support for searching and possible reunions with members of their birth families.

### **Holistic Assessment of the Child**

- The assessment should not just be a single superficial snapshot. Drawing an analogy with a car - we need a full MOT at a garage with shiny state of the art equipment operated by a team of intelligent, motivated, highly skilled mechanics, who provide a full written assessment of the existing problems, indicate possible future concerns, note that the spark plugs need adjusting, which of the many noises are alarm signals, when to return for a service and then estimate the repair costs. Sometimes cars are assessed by a bloke we met in the pub, who works in a dingy garage with no inspection pit, hasn’t bought new tool in a decade, can’t find his glasses, and ignores the rust pockets. Aaahhh.... but, he is cheaper. Allowing our children to be assessed by Slack Harry is disgraceful. Let’s not kid ourselves; Slack Harry currently walks the

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corridors in some Social Service, NHS and Education Departments, rusty spanner in hand.

- A common misdiagnosis is that of ADHD (Attention Deficient Hyperactivity Disorder). The 'symptoms' or behaviours associated with ADHD are similar to those associated with Attachment Disorders. However there are significant differences - an ADHD child won't sit for half an hour reading a book, a child with Attachment disorder will (provided they feel safe). Yet a significant number of adopted (or Long Term Fostered) children are put on Ritalin for years through misdiagnosis. This is outrageous.
- The assessment will often need to be multi faceted. Some children will need to see specialist paediatricians and/or therapists and/or child psychiatrist and/or educational psychologists. Some children will need even more.

## Treatments

- Access to the following, and where payment is required funded by the Authorities not the parents,
  - within the National Health Service adopted children should be given the same priority as 'Children Looked After'. Their needs do not change on the granting of an adoption order.
  - osteopathy and chiropractic treatment. Many natural parents take their children to cranial osteopaths or chiropractors for manipulation soon after birth. No one ever does that to a child in foster care. (Remember that many adopted children have been hit in infancy which can distort the skeleton).
  - applied kinesiology - a non invasive diagnostic tool using muscle testing as a way of evaluating health and disease such as allergy, intolerances, nutritional and chemical deficiencies or abnormalities.(Remember prior to birth adopted children may have had no prenatal care, may have suffered substance abuse, may have been flooded with stress hormones, mother's diet may have been poor, this will all affect the growth, development and formation of the foetus).
  - proven alternative treatments including homeopathy, reflexology, flower essences, reiki, massage, ....and whatever works for that child
  - extra educational support - tutors, after school and holiday activities and clubs,

## Therapy and Counselling

- Appropriate and effective therapy available to all when needed funded by the Authorities. Please remember therapy is tough for both child and parents. No-one undertakes therapy unless they have to. It is not an easy option - it's often the last resort but can be hugely effective.
- Therapy that helps children understand and make sense of their early experiences. Talking therapy is often less effective for children if the damage occurred when the child was pre-lingual. Therapist training needs to reflect this accordingly.
- Therapy that gets to the heart of the issue - a person's sense of self, their values and beliefs not just behaviour modification. Sometimes people need help in understanding and accepting that their view of themselves and their map o the world is skewed. (This applies to all corners of the triangle). There is a desperate need for therapists trained specifically to work with adopted and long term fostered children with attachment problems. A Centre of Excellence (virtual not necessarily bricks and mortar) should be established. The expertise exists - it simply needs disseminating.

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- Counselling services for birth parents (whose children have been removed from their care) should be completely separate from Social Services at a neutral venue provided by staff who were totally unconnected with the removal of their child.
- Counselling services for birth parents should be ongoing, non-judgemental and supportive. Birth parents may need long term support to understand the circumstances of their child's adoption and to deal with the heavy grief and sadness they carry. One session (currently, often all that's offered) is just not enough.
- Therapeutic support available on demand - at 3 pm on a Sunday if that's when its most effective - telephone support will do.

### **Train, Educate and Enlighten**

Facilitating learning for all those involved with adopted children, their birth family or adoptive parents, is arguably the most important of all interventions. The more knowledge an individual has, the more choices they have, the more empowered they become, the more positive the outcome.

- Social Workers who deal with children should have specific knowledge and understanding of
  - different family systems and structures,
  - importance of ethnicity, religion and culture, in relation to a child's identity within a community within society
  - child development (normal and abnormal), attachment patterns, loss and separation
  - effects of early traumatic experiences on a child
  - long term impact of abuse, domestic violence and neglect
  - significance of continuity, connection and contact
  - criteria for removing child from a damaging home
- Social Workers should be informed of research, good practice developments and initiatives
- Social Workers need help to reframe the permanent removal of some children from their birth family as a positive outcome for the child, not as their failure in keeping a family together.

Adopters often travel along a very tortuous road while raising their children. They can't see what is round the next bend, so don't know what skills, tools, understanding or knowledge they will need in the future. They must be empowered and encouraged to access the learning they need throughout their child's life.

- Being an adoptive parent changes an individual in many ways. Embracing those changes is so much easier when you know why they are happening. Ongoing access to conferences, books, articles, videos, tapes and any other way of learning which helps adopters to understand their experiences and may provide signposts for the future.
- Adopters need to meet other adopters who are at both similar and different stages of the process. Metaphorically, most adopters wear the same size shoes, because they often have similar experiences and feelings. Such interactions uniquely reduce the sense of isolation and guilt adopters can feel. I have read many books and attended many conferences, but my greatest insight has come through fellow adopters. I am a

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stronger and wiser person, and a far better Mother for that learning. I am deeply grateful to them all.

- Teachers with responsibility for Children in Need and Learning Mentors in Secondary Schools should be the first to receive training about the impact of adoption on a child. This should include the forms and effect of infant trauma, adaptive behaviours, possible triggers and strategies for the management of the child.
- This module should be incorporated into teacher training immediately and should be used as an INSET Day(In Service Training) in all schools; Local Authority Education Officers should be included. They are often involved at crisis point; earlier involvement and knowledge will open up a wider range of options. A school age child may need extra time at home to regress and attach to his adoptive parents. A flexible approach to school attendance would be beneficial.
- Many therapists within the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Departments (and beyond) need some serious retraining. The new understanding of attachment, attunement and an infant's brain development has bypassed them. Excluding adoptive parents and refusing to share the content of a therapy session is ineffective, wrong and punitive. It leaves the parents ill equipped to cope with the inevitable post therapy fall out.

Adopters need recognition by all professionals that they are part of the solution; not part of the problem. We did not inflict the damage on our children; we simply live with the resultant behaviour while providing running repairs.

### **Fairy Godmother please grant these three wishes**

- Let children be born to adults who can fulfil their needs, keep them safe and be good enough parents
- If birth parents are unable to nurture a child long term, let that child be removed quickly and placed with adopters without drifting in the care system.
- Let adoption support respect the recipient, start from where they are, not where anyone wants them to be; by standing in their shoes, seeing what they see, hearing what they hear and feeling what they feel; by honouring their map of the world, let adoption support be what's needed and wanted at that time, in that place, by that person. ***I wish!***

*“You see things; and you say, 'Why?'  
But I dream things that never were; and I say, 'Why not?'”*  
**George Bernard Shaw**

### **Helen Oakwater is an adoptive parent, Executive Coach and NLP Trainer.**

She adopted a sibling group in the early 1990s and has first hand experience of living with “the child who hurts”. Her knowledge and perspectives are from books, numerous training courses, adopters and through her own personal journey.

She sat on two Local Authority Adoption Panels and been active in Adoption UK for many years.

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Her adoption and NLP credentials are listed on her web site, where other articles can be seen.

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