

# Would-be adopters wrongly assume they're not suitable

Adoption is an emotive subject and seldom out of the news. But a shortage of people coming forward to adopt is the greatest barrier in helping more children find their 'forever' families, writes **Gerry Cooney**, chief executive at St David's Children's Society

**L**AST year, as many as one in four children available for adoption were not placed with a "forever" family, primarily due to a lack of adopters.

So why are so few people coming forward to adopt? Experience suggests that many suitable individuals, couples and families mistakenly believe that they will not be considered, but in reality they would make great parents. It is true that there are some circumstances that preclude people from adopting, but rarely does one factor automatically exclude someone from being considered.

Perceived barriers include unemployment, age, smoking, weight issues, delays and political correctness.

Unemployment is not an obstacle to adoption. In fact the opposite is the case. Unemployed families often have more time and energy to invest in children. Nor should the lack of finances be a barrier. In some cases on-going financial support is available.

All prospective adopters are required to undergo a full medical check as part of the approval process. Weight and smoking are some of the factors that the medical report explores. The individual's GP completes the report upon which the adoption agency medical adviser makes a recommendation as to whether a person is medically fit to adopt.

There are, of course, checks and balances that need to be in place. There is a difference between people being overweight or significantly overweight. For the latter, should an individual be motivated to reduce their weight, in consultation with their GP, this would be viewed as a very positive commitment to the adoption process. Similar considerations apply to smoking – adoption is a powerful motivational factor.



■ The reality is that many people who count themselves out would make great parents for needy children PICTURE POSED BY MODEL

not a hurdle. It aims to support life chances for children.

Children placed for adoption have already lost one set of parents. The medical report aims to minimise known potential risk that may cause further distress to the child.

Most agencies are flexible regarding the age of applicants and common sense should prevail. The process is greatly helped when prospective adopters work at becoming child focused. For a young, childless family the wish to adopt a baby is the most natural of responses. Consider asking the question, "could I adopt a very young child of three or four years of age?" Such very young children have many needs, including unmet infancy needs.

Adoption is often reported as a long, drawn-out process with applicants regularly facing lengthy delays. The whole process from first contact to adoption panel approval

should, on average, take no more than eight months. There is an immense amount of work to be completed including training, statutory and personal checks, followed by the adoption assessment report and panel hearing. Most of the adoptive families we work with advise that the eight month timescale feels about right to them.

Some adoption agencies are under-performing, but others work well. If adoptive applicants are subjected to delays, children face delays. Prospective adopters should have the confidence to talk to agencies about the services they offer, including the timescales, and if they are unhappy with the response, consider moving to another agency – as this is their prerogative.

Adoption works. On average those who apply to St David's for adoption are assessed, approved and have a child

placed with them for adoption within one year from their first phone call.

All of us have heard distressing stories about the high number of adoptions that end in failure. Some reports suggest that as many as one in five adoption placements breakdown. The most critical factor to the success of any adoption placement is the support the adoptive family receives. Support must be there at the very beginning of the adoptive parent's journey – from the point of their first phone call. Trust and confidence should be developed at all stages of the adoption journey.

Adoption works. St David's breakdown rates are amongst the lowest in the UK, primarily due to the way adoptive families are supported. Only three of St David's last 100 placements ended in breakdowns. That was three too many, but we have learned

from these and aim to do better.

The language sometimes used to describe these children does them an injustice: they are often referred to as being "damaged". These are children who have been neglected and mistreated. While they require a different style of parenting, fundamentally, they have the same needs as all other children.

Adoption is not easy but you will be supported for as long as it takes. These children need families to believe in them. They have the desire and the capacity to be loved. Their deepest wish, like every other child, is to be part of a forever family. They need loving homes now. Please consider adoption. Please pick up the phone now.

■ **Gerry Cooney** is chief executive of St David's Children's Society, Wales longest established adoption agency