

FAR, FAR BEYOND THE ADOPTION ORDER:

Lessons From Lives Impacted By Trauma

RESEARCH RESULTS REPORT SUMMARY

JUNE 2025



**THE
POTATO GROUP**

**WITH GILLIAN ELAM
INDEPENDENT SOCIAL RESEARCHER**

DEDICATION

Far, Far Beyond The Adoption Order

As committed parents, our strength is knowing that we will do whatever it takes to love, support and help our children to become good enough adults and parents of the future.

This research is dedicated to ALL our children who struggle, day in and day out with the lifelong effects of their early trauma.

Some of our children will never be able to reach the hopes and dreams that all parents want for their children. The effects of their struggles with their early trauma meant that they could not continue to live in a world that could not hear or help them.

FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS

Alex, Billy, Charlie, Emz, Jade, Jerral and Marc
Forever aged between 19 and 32 years old.

Thinking too of other POTATO members' children, members and their partners that have also died.

FOREWORD

As the founding and current Chairs of The Potato Group, we are proud to introduce this summary report of our research, which contributes to the evidence base and stands as a powerful testament to the realities faced by families raising traumatised adopted children and young adults.

This research does not present an abstract policy issue or a distant academic concern. It reflects the daily lived experience of our families. Families who have opened not only their homes but their hearts to children who carry the deep and lasting impact of early trauma. The findings are stark, but they are familiar to those of us who live this life. They speak to the exhaustion, isolation and relentless advocacy that characterise the parenting of children and young adults who do not respond to conventional strategies, whose needs are routinely misunderstood, and who too often fall through the gaps in the systems meant to support them.

We hope this summary report will be read with care, with humility and with a readiness to act. This research is unique, and could not have been carried out to the same effect by a researcher from outside of our group. There are no simple solutions, and the work ahead is substantial. But we believe that meaningful change is possible. More than that, we believe it is essential. Our families, particularly the children and young adults they support, deserve better.

Every day, in our online community ‘Spudland’, we hear from families who continue to contend with the many issues documented here. We read of constant battles to have our children’s needs understood and validated by the very organisations we believed would treat us with care, understanding and expertise.

Adopters do not sleepwalk into adoption. We step forward with eyes open, prepared and committed. We adopt for a broad spectrum of reasons. Many of us have a pre-existing understanding of adverse childhood experiences, trauma and the many complex needs that exist in our children. Some come from professional backgrounds working with children and young adults. Others are already parents. And yet, this experience and knowledge does not prepare us for the reality of family life with children and young adults who have suffered significant early life trauma.

Like all parents, Potato Group members are driven by a lifelong commitment to our children, often, as we will see, to the detriment of wider family relationships, friendships, physical and mental health, physical safety, finances and careers. Our recognition of their suffering kindles a fierce determination to address the injustices they face. We hope that, in reading the results of our research and the insights that stem from it, you will join with us in our determination to do better for our children.

What emerges clearly is that many services remain ill-equipped to support adopted children and young adults. Trauma is frequently overlooked, and families find themselves having to fight for recognition, for access to appropriate help, and sometimes simply to be believed. There is a damaging disconnect between the policies laid out on paper and what families encounter in practice. Too many professionals lack the training to recognise developmental trauma and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and too many adoptive parents are left feeling blamed, unsupported and alone.

Yet there is physical, emotional, mental and social resilience here. There is commitment. There is knowledge born of lived experience, and a willingness among families not only to survive but to speak up and drive change. This research is part of that effort. It brings forward the voices of those who are too often unheard and offers practical, lived-experience-informed recommendations for improvement.

As parents, we fiercely advocate for our children when the world seems set against them. This summary, and the contributions held within, are an expression of exactly that. It is a document rooted in love and in hope: for our children, for our fellow adoptive families, and for the adoptive families of the future.

June Leat
Founding Chair

Euan Preston
Chair

The Potato Group, June 2025

The full research report is available from www.thepotatogroup.org.uk or contact us by email for more information research@thepotatogroup.org.uk

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is the result of a collaboration among members of the POTATO group for our conference “Far, Far Beyond the Adoption Order”, held in May 2024, hosted in partnership with The Belay Foundation.

We are very grateful to: all of our amazing members who revisited some of the most traumatising times of their lives to share their experiences in our survey and in our qualitative interviews; the POTATO Committee and Conference Steering Group for their expert advice, guidance and ethical oversight; our quantitative and qualitative researchers, graphic designer, peer reviewers and proof readers; our founding chair for her constant commitment to the wellbeing of POTATO and to improving outcomes for our families and children; and our wonderful children who keep on going and keep us going.

SUMMARY

Background

POTATO (Parents Of Traumatised Adopted Teenagers Organisation) is an established online peer-to-peer support group for parents of traumatised adopted teenagers and adults in the UK. POTATO carried out research in 2024 into the lived experiences of families caring for traumatised adopted children. 70% of members replied to the survey, representing the experiences of 438 parents caring for over 700 pre-teens, teenagers, young adults and adults. Twenty-three members participated in the qualitative research, producing in-depth insights into adoptive families' experiences.

Results

One in four of families' children are currently or have been parented at a distance while living away from their adoptive families via s20 voluntary accommodation or Care Order. Three-quarters (73%) of all families said they were at risk of having to consider such arrangements now or at some point. At the cusp of a s20, teenagers and families found themselves face-to-face with accumulating needs, extreme behaviours and unfamiliar services that varied in their ability to understand and meet this explosion of challenges. One incident could trigger service involvement, but teenagers were overwhelmed by a cluster of ongoing, long-term events.



Two-thirds (66%) of families with more than one child could not leave siblings together unsupervised due to the risk of violence. 66% of parents of more than one child were refused support for sibling relationships when requested.

One in four children attempted suicide and 59% self-harmed. Five children died prematurely in different circumstances related to their trauma histories. Nearly all children, including adults, were described as hypervigilant and / or anxious. 37% of families were denied assessments by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services or equivalent; and in 44% of families, assessment requests were unmet by the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (England only). 65% of all parents agreed that their children's behaviour had been blamed on their parenting.

LESSONS FROM LIVES IMPACTED BY TRAUMA



SURVEY OVERVIEW

70% Response Rate

438 Parents

Representing over 700 pre-teens, teens & adults

1 in 4 Children parented at a distance

This research was conducted by The POTATO Group, among their members



FASD AND NEURODEVELOPMENT

62% Suspected / diagnosed ADHD (only 31% can access medication)

76% Exposed to parental alcohol abuse (first families)

Only 13% diagnosed with FASD post-adoption



SAFETY RISKS IN THE HOME

66% of families with siblings could not leave them unsupervised (risk of violence)

66% of families with siblings were refused sibling relationship support

75% Experienced child-to-parent violence

>50% Called police/locked themselves in a room/left home for safety



MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

1 in 4 Attempted suicide

59% Self-harmed

37% Rejected by CAMHS

44% Rejected by Adoption Support Fund

5 Children died in circumstances related to their trauma

Nearly all children were hyper-vigilant and/or anxious



EDUCATION & CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

56% Fixed or permanent school exclusions

36% Victims of criminal exploitation

13% Of our children convicted of a crime

4% Have been imprisoned



IMPACT ON FAMILIES

34% Of parents gave up careers to care

82% Reduced income

>80% Experienced anxiety and fear

Significant secondary trauma, emotional distress and isolation

We love our children

We do not blame them

They have survived trauma & have been failed by services

CHANGE is urgently needed

POTATO is a peer to peer support group - Parents of Traumatised Adopted Teens Organisation
thepotatogroup.org.uk

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of children had suspected or diagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, but just 31% received medication. 76% of children came from first families with parental alcohol misuse, but only 3% of children were diagnosed with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) pre-adoption and 13% post.

Over half (56%) of children had experience of fixed or permanent exclusions from school. Over a third (36%) of families reported that their children had experienced criminal exploitation. One in 25 of children have been sentenced to prison. 13% of children have been convicted of a crime. A quarter of those experiencing criminal charges were 13 years or under; a third (33%) were aged 14 and 15 years. Over a third (36%) of children have experienced sexual risk and harm since being adopted.

For the majority of parents, caring for a traumatised teenager and dealing with services had an impact on emotional wellbeing, mental health, secondary trauma and access to life outside the home. Nearly all families experienced verbal abuse and damage to the home from their children. Three out of 4 families experienced child to parent violence and abuse. Over half of families have called the police, locked themselves in another room or left their home for safety. One in 3 gave up careers to care for their children and 82% have reduced income. All parents felt emotionally exhausted and the majority experienced anxiety and fear.

Relationships were maintained with first parents, siblings, grandparents and foster carers, but were limited when the needs of children were high. These relationships were as healthy as they were harmful; and siblings had opposing attitudes to one another about the connections they wanted from their first parents. Professional understanding of the significance of the death of a first family member was poor.

Context

These issues do not just affect children adopted at an older age. Just under half of children (47%) were removed from their first families in their first year of life, with a quarter (24%) removed from first families at birth. POTATO families included those with children adopted as babies: 15% were placed aged one and under and a third were aged one and two years old. POTATO experiences are shared by adoptive families elsewhere in the UK. The 2024 Adoption Barometer (England) reported that 57% of families with children aged 13 to 25 were facing severe challenges or reaching crisis point and less than a quarter of families (23%) felt there was appropriate support for teenagers and young adults (Adoption UK 2024). POTATO experiences represent families and children living in all regions of the UK, and who have adopted from nearly every UK local authority and voluntary adoption agency.

Conclusion

We deeply love our children. Our children have experienced traumas that no child should experience. They have then been let down by education, health and social care systems that should have been there for them. We wish for an end to the underestimation in services of the pervasive and enduring impact of trauma and its interactions with FASD and neurodevelopmental disability. This needs to change. We remain fully committed to supporting our children throughout their teens and adulthood and will continue to be by their side and advocate for them for as long as we, or they, have breath, but we should not be doing so alone.

Further information is available from research@thepotatogroup.org.uk

RECOMMENDATIONS

We hope our research will form the basis of a renewed understanding of the experiences and needs of adoptive families living with chronic and intensifying distress.

To move forward, families and professionals need a shared understanding of modern adoption, and trauma must be central to that understanding. Children are taken into care for serious reasons. Trauma does not heal on its own, nor is it eased by love alone. The impact of early adversity does not vanish when an Adoption Order is made. Trauma persists and often permeates every aspect of family life.

Adoptive families represent a tiny minority of United Kingdom (UK) households with dependent children. This no doubt contributes to the lack of awareness and understanding. In some fields, professionals may never have worked with a modern adoptive family, and so the assumptions they bring may not fit. Many adoptive families encounter professionals whose frameworks for understanding behaviour are fundamentally misaligned with the realities of trauma and neurodevelopmental difficulty.

As parents, we are committed to our children for life. That commitment remains even when the scale of need exceeds what parents can reasonably manage. In our survey, one in four of our children had left the family home prematurely, often re-entering the care system. This is not a failure of parenting. Parents continue to parent at a distance. Typically, families have soldiered on, doing their best in the face of extreme need. But what many have encountered instead of support is institutional failure and betrayal.

This must change. It is time for professionals to recognise that it is not poor parenting at play, but the profound and lasting effects of early adversity. We are asking too much of families to meet these needs alone. We need the help of professionals who are not only trauma-informed, but also trauma responsive.

The belief that love is enough remains widespread. Love is essential, and it exists in abundance in our homes. But it exists alongside an intense and complicated emotional landscape that shifts constantly. Love is there, but so are fear, grief, anxiety, sadness, and frustration. We need professionals to understand this complexity.

We know services are under pressure. Professionals do not wield magic wands. But neither do we. By the time a professional becomes involved with an adoptive family, very often that family has already been through years of adaptation, problem-solving and resilience. Our parenting may not look “typical”. To an outsider, it may even look inadequate. But this is not a failure of love or effort. It is the scale of our children’s needs that creates a gap we cannot close on our own.

We are not claiming to be flawless. But adoptive parents are expected to provide everything a parent should, and far more besides. When we seek support, and are met instead with judgment or dismissal, the gap only widens. What often follows is a delayed, reluctant recognition of need that comes too late, and too slowly, to prevent harm.

When professionals become involved in our lives, we ask to be seen not as part of the problem, but as part of the solution. We love our children. We want the same for them as any parent wants. But we need your understanding, and we need your help. The impact of early trauma is lifelong. So too is our love.

With thanks to those dedicated parents whose words have contributed to these recommendations.

Euan Preston
Chair, The Potato Group

www.thepotatogroup.org.uk