

Voluntary Adoption Agency Advice Guides
March 2024

Advice from Adopters
**Adopting children with
additional needs**



What is a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA)?

VAA's are independent, not for profit organisations which are smaller than most statutory agencies and offer a personalised service to adopters from all backgrounds. VAA's work in partnership with local authorities and regional adoption agencies across the whole of the UK to find families for children in care who are unable to stay with their birth relatives.

There are 21 Voluntary Adoption Agencies, covering every region and country of the UK, which are members of CVAA. Learn more and find details of your local VAA via:

www.cvaa.org.uk

About this advice guide

We are delighted to share our advice guide about adopting children with additional needs. The guide is part of a series, created by our Voluntary Adoption Agency members with very special contributions from adoptive parents.

We hope you find it interesting and useful as you embark on your own journey to adopt.

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It is our network of people that have helped us achieve this with our son Bill – support in adoption is vital. ”

Ash & Graham, Adoption Matters

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When you're thinking about your yes/no/maybe list of characteristics and disabilities, be as open as you can possibly be, as the right child for you might just have an additional need and you might well cope with it more readily than you think you can. ”

Ellie*, PACT



2024 - Our vision, mission and charitable objectives

CVAA vision is a modern adoption system across the UK which provides lifelong care and support for all the children who need it, validating their identity and ensuring their early relationships are respected through to adulthood.

CVAA's role in achieving this vision is to champion and support VAAs in their life-changing work. We are wholly committed to adopter choice and the vital contribution of a thriving VAA sector, able to provide the best possible support for birth and adoptive families in their lifelong adoption journeys.

Our mission is to enable VAAs, in partnership with others across social care, to play an active part in creating a system which is focused on the rights of all children to lifelong care and stability, supports their families, and provides the choice of modern adoption for all those who need it.

VAAs put children first, always. In our lobbying and advocacy, CVAA upholds that central principle and works to amplify the voice and influence of VAAs using their collective wisdom and the integrity of their work to achieve positive change for children.

Our charitable objectives are:

- To develop standards of excellence in practice and management throughout the voluntary sector.
- To promote cooperation between voluntary and statutory sectors in the adoption system and reduce barriers to interagency placements.
- To influence policy and practice in the wider adoption system at local, regional and national levels



A warm welcome

Whether you already know your stuff, or are just starting on your journey, VAAs will meet you where you are.



Personalised service

Our members will help you create a family that is just right for you and your children. They are always on your side.

Why adopt through a VAA?



Excellent standard of quality

Of CVAA's 21 members, almost all are independently rated 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. You're in good hands.



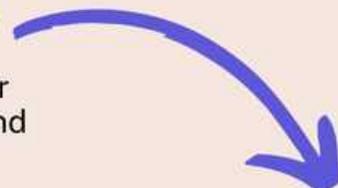
Lifelong support

Your VAA will be there for you and your children for life. Adoption is a lifelong journey, not a destination.



Find your local agency

For support, advice, and information, or to embark on your adoption journey, find a local Voluntary Adoption Agency that's right for you.



Adopting a child with additional needs

What does 'additional needs' mean?

The term covers a very wide spectrum of needs and behaviours and it's often very misinterpreted or misunderstood.

All children can have additional needs at times. These could be to do with their development, learning, communication, behaviour, or emotional well-being. There are also children with physical disabilities that may require support including adaptations to their home. Neurodiversity is also often referred to as an additional need. Additional needs can be called special educational needs or disabilities, referred to as SEN and SEND. Additional needs can be short-term or long-term, as some children may need additional help for a short period of time while others may need it for longer and some lifelong into adulthood.

It is usual practice for adoption social workers to have a discussion with their prospective adopters about what they feel they could manage as parents when meeting a child's needs. The training and preparation received during assessment helps prospective adopters understand the needs of the children waiting and explore their own strengths and abilities as a parent.

It is often difficult to explain in detail exactly what each additional need is for the children we work with, as every child is unique. Their needs will also change as they grow, just as all of our needs change as we age.

Capturing additional needs in imagery is also difficult, as we know that many additional needs and/or disabilities are invisible. Any images contained within this guide are stock photos, unless stated they are real photographs of adopters and are meant as a representation of the very wide spectrum of children and families that we work with.

It may sound daunting, but adopting a child with additional needs is incredibly rewarding and gives them a chance to flourish. Many of the thousands of children in care waiting for an adoptive family who have additional needs wait much longer than other children. **We want to help change that.**

In this guide, adopters from voluntary adoption agencies, share their experiences of their unique adoption journeys about the joys of adopting a child with additional needs and offer practical advice to prospective adopters.

Find your local agency:

www.cvaa.org.uk/agency-finder



What is the best thing about adopting a child with additional needs?



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Wow there are so many! Adopting a child with additional needs is life changing it's the most challenging, rewarding, amazing thing you can ever imagine. Being a parent of a child with complex health care needs changes your whole outlook on life, what once seemed so important, becomes insignificant.

Jenny*, Yorkshire Adoption Agency

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The smiles, glee, cuteness, adorable and teddy bear like nature that she carries. There are many times where she'll just burst into laughter which is so contagious, of course there are times where it's so, so difficult too! It has been so illuminating to parent an additional needs child/children as our eldest has needs too which are not as obvious. We realise that we aren't like most families and that is part of the joy. We are unique just like **every child is unique**.

Simon*, PACT

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“ Adopting a child with additional needs has been extremely rewarding. It's wonderful to watch him grow and develop and prove everyone wrong.

He is capable of so much and thriving in a mainstream school with a support teaching assistant. I've found his classmates are extremely protective of him and he has been accepted by the entire school community.

He is a very special little boy. He's made my family complete and has taught us to see the world in a **completely different and unique light**. ”

Katie, ARC Adoption NE

www.cvaa.org.uk/agency-finder



What is the best thing about adopting a child with additional needs?

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The feeling of watching your child reach forward and grasp a toy after you've done hours of physio to enable them to achieve this is incredible. Watching them grow and achieve through their own sheer determination is unforgettable.

David*, Yorkshire Adoption Agency

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Probably similar to adopting any child... my children are gorgeous and clever and delightful.

Simon*, PACT

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The best things for us have been having a little girl grow in our family and be the best she can be. Seeing her incredible progress, constantly achieving more than people thought she would. Looking at Ds character, not disability, and knowing that you are helping them on their journey to brilliance - whatever their "brilliance" looks like.

We would 100% recommend adopting a child with additional needs – the rewards and pride are a million fold more than health appointments and worries.

As we always say **"every problem is an opportunity in disguise."**

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Kevin & Deb pictured, ARC Adoption NE

www.cvaa.org.uk/agency-finder





What is the best thing about adopting a child with additional needs?



hearing your child say '**mummy**' when you were told she would never speak
knowing **she can see and hear** when you were told she was deaf and blind
the little things that **she can express herself**, that she is growing albeit slowly,
that she is developing, and **is her own little person**

that **she pats me on the back when I cuddle her** and that she knows who we
all are, in spite of dire predictions

seeing her **achieve so much** more than anyone thought she would, or could
being able to **give her a good family life** where she is **loved and celebrated**
being able to experience as much of life as is possible despite her limitations
fighting for her and winning



watching her fight her many medical setbacks and **winning**

seeing how **cheerful and funny** and flirty and gorgeous she is with all her
problems

she's a bit too young to be aware of her disabilities at the moment but she
doesn't seem to let them stop her doing what she needs to do

seeing how she draws others to her and engages them in conversation, in the
supermarket, at church, even on the street -
she is **always up for a good chat!**



being loved by and loving an
extraordinary child.

Barbara, pictured, Caritas Care



What is the best thing about adopting a child with additional needs?

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We had a lot of experience of living with someone who needed support educationally and medically. It gave us the experience of being able to foster someone with extra needs as well. That's why we specifically went to Barnardo's, they are there for children who might need a little bit extra.

Gillian, Adopter and Foster Carer, Barnardo's

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Seeing them grow massively in confidence and in their relationships with us and our wider family. We love seeing them thrive at school and flourish in their hobbies and interests. It's rewarding to know that we're helping to give them strong foundations so they can enjoy their lives to the full as they grow up.

Hannah, Caritas Care

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We adopted 7 year old Billy when he was 4 and a half. I had worked for a number of years with children who have special needs, and this opened my eyes to the particular needs of children who have a diagnosis.

We already have two grown up sons, but as we reached our mid 40's, realised that we still had much to give to another child. This time we wanted to give back to a child through adoption - and adopt a child who other adopters may not consider. Billy is an integral part of our lives and is loved by all in the wider family network.

Eve*, Diagrama Foundation

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Parenting a child with additional needs teaches you so much about the world, it teaches you what life is truly meant for, it teaches you to advocate, to shout when you aren't being heard, to fight when you need to, to listen to a whisper but above all to love, to love like you've never loved before.

John & Tara*, Yorkshire Adoption Agency

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Bonny, who is now 4 - joined our family when she was 3 years old. Bonny has an Autism diagnosis and at the time she came to us was non-verbal. She brings immeasurable joy to us as a couple and we are currently in the process of being assessed as second time adopters. Bonny started school last September and is settling well. Although we have found it a challenge to get Bonny the right support she requires within school, it's a challenge we feel equipped to take on. I have a sibling with autism and this was a driver in us hoping to adopt a child with a similar diagnosis.

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Holly & Chris, Diagrama Foundation

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Initially in my adoption journey, I had some reservations about caring for a child with additional needs. But as I learned more about Victoria* and her conditions, it became less of a barrier. Everything I thought I couldn't cope with at the beginning, I have managed to cope with.”

“My daughter is so much more than I could ever have hoped for. My expectations have been exceeded a thousand times over. We talk about how she found me, and I found her. We couldn't imagine a better match.

She's just a **really special person.** ”

Rita*, Coram

www.cvaa.org.uk/agency-finder



“ Our daughter's birth mum has learning disabilities and there was a question about her own developmental health and what it might mean for her outcomes. We had discussed it and felt we would be able to cope with this uncertainty. At that point we realised we loved her. All we wanted to do was to support her to be able to live a happy and independent life.

We spoke to someone at the time of adopting who works with adults with learning disabilities who was so wonderful about the joy that it brings.

Our daughter is wonderful. We almost don't have the words for the incredible explosion that happened in our lives the moment we met her. And she is very funny! She's unequivocally our daughter yet we don't hide the fact that she has a birth family.

Erin and Rob*, Coram

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Bill has defied the odds and exceeded everyone's expectations of him and he delights us every day.

Ash & Graham, Adoption Matters

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It feels like such a privilege to be able to help my daughter become herself. I can't take credit for the person she is becoming but I feel that I'm part of it. It feels like my greatest achievement. The rewards are more rewarding when you've had a difficult start.

Rita*, Coram

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We had not been looking to extend our existing adoptive family, but when working at an adoption activity day I met D, who was potentially going to be long term fostered as an adoptive family could not be found. It was instantly obvious that despite having additional needs, she was a force to be reckoned with, who I couldn't believe was "hard to place".

I spoke to hubby that night about how sad it was that she was being overlooked. Having recently retired, he suggested he could do more "housework" or more "parenting"! We learnt about her cerebral palsy straight away and started to research the implications. We also knew there was a potential she had Foetal Alcohol syndrome. We got lots of information from the Social Work team and supported well by ARC to consider the implications for us. We decided that, to be honest, why would we not want to adopt this bundle of joy with such a spirit for life! If we have health appointments so-be-it, children always have "things to do" and for D much of that was health related.

Already having a child with global delay we remained steadfast our growing family would be the best versions of themselves they could be - whatever the challenges lay ahead.

Kevin & Deb, ARC Adoption NE

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Our son Bill has a rare chromosome condition. When we adopted him, we were told that his condition was uncertain, he would need to go to special education and he probably wouldn't be able to read and write. Professionals were unsure if he would even be able to talk to us or not.

Bill has defied the odds and exceeded everyone's expectations of him and he delights us every day. He is now attending mainstream school!

**Ash & Graham pictured with Bill
Adoption Matters**

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What were the challenges of adopting a child with additional needs?

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There will always be potential challenges that are unique to adoption. But we've gone from strength to strength as people and a couple. Every phase has some really hard emotions and also different wonderful emotions. We don't feel that's any different to being a parent in general. We're really proud of our daughter – and us to be honest!

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Erin & Rob*, Coram

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As my sister has Down's syndrome, it was relatively straightforward to adopt a child with Down's syndrome, so that's how my son came home aged nine months. However I remember the medical adviser being surprised by my insistence that I would be proceeding with the adoption given that birth mum had Hepatitis C and there was a worry my son would also have it.

In my view, once you find the right child, you'll advocate for them and deal with whatever comes your way, and my son is now eight and we've been through a lot including respiratory problems leading to worrying times in hospital but I'd never change my decision to adopt him. I had previously had a social worker visit about a child *without* additional needs but I quickly learnt that I wouldn't cope with her behavioural issues and had to rethink.

My second adoption was more tricky just because my daughter's foster mum didn't think I could cope given that I was a single adopter and already had a child with additional needs. How right she was! It's been really hard at times, but we're two years in now and thriving.

Fortunately, my brilliant PACT social worker helped persuade the Local Authority that we could make it a success. ”

Ellie*, PACT



What were the challenges of adopting a child with additional needs?

“ The main challenges that we have faced have dealt with development as our youngest daughter has a global delay. This can be misunderstood quite easily because she is physically the same as her peers but behind them in all aspects of learning, speech and language. This means she gets along much better with children who are younger than her which can be difficult in a school setting.

The challenges we face most consistently now revolve around education as she progresses through school and gets older. We've had to be logged with the local council, education authority and local school to assure that she is receiving the best education she can for the stage where she is presently. This means, much like other aspects of adoption we have to fight her corner.

As with other aspects though, it's so worth it! ”

Simon*, PACT

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Challenges I have faced are mainly around his global developmental delay and behavioural issues relating to his chromosome deletion and the impact this has had on his need for independence and requiring a high level of support. The adoption support fund helped us access occupational therapy which is significantly improving his life. There is a lot of help and support out there for children with additional needs and disabilities.

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Katie, ARC Adoption NE

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Having to seek out authorisation for surgeries / medical interventions. Once you recognise that child's disabilities form part of who they are you are loving every aspect of that child. It's just another job you do for a child - changing a stoma or changing a nappy. ”

Gillian, Barnardo's



What were the challenges of adopting a child with additional needs?

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The challenges are many and varied. They are no better or worse than with a child without additional needs they are just different. One of our challenges was enabling our daughter to have suitable seating and head support. There are challenges you cannot know about until they happen but that would be the same with any child. Be organised and know who to contact for which aspect of your child's care.

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Barbara & Alison, Caritas Care

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Both of our children have had challenges managing their emotions, which can lead to meltdowns of a larger intensity than perhaps would be expected from children of their age. Caritas Care were amazing at helping us identify the right support, and both children have benefitted from play therapy to help them process some of the trauma from their early years.

We also received support in helping us to understand the needs that our children were expressing through specific behaviours, and how to adapt our parenting to meet those needs.

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Hannah*, Caritas Care

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Our initial adopter preparation training taught us to have empathy and respect for birth parents. We share regular photos with Bill's birth Mum and Dad.

They have some additional needs and not much understanding about adoption but I know that they love Bill as much as we do.

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Ash & Graham, Adoption Matters



What advice would you give to someone thinking about adopting a child with additional needs?

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To know your limits. Don't adopt a child with additional needs if you cannot cope with an aspect of that child's needs. E.g. if you know you are not very medically minded perhaps don't focus on a child with high medical needs.

To research the needs of children with particular conditions or use experience you already have of additional needs.

Join social media groups for the particular needs your possible child has and ask advice about the joys and sorrows of parenting a child with those needs.

Talking to other parents/grandparents/siblings of a child with additional needs can be invaluable, as what is available on paper won't always paint a true picture. Sometimes medics can be overly negative or overly positive. ”

Barbara & Alison, Caritas Care

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Do not focus on the "dis", focus on the 'ability.' We all have challenges in life - disabilities are just more obvious but if you focus on supporting the child being able to fulfil whatever their potential is, the joy is unbounding.

On a practical note do make sure you have a good support network as there may be practical juggling needing for health appointments especially if needing to be balanced against, other family member needs.

Also DO NOT hesitate to take support and help - there is plenty out there, starting with your adoption agency! Do not compare their milestones and achievements to other children even with the same conditions.

Be careful to note how things started and then you can see how things are going and celebrate their achievements and help them with their struggles. ”

Kevin & Deb, ARC Adoption NE

www.cvaa.org.uk/agency-finder



What advice would you give to someone thinking about adopting a child with additional needs?

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I would advise prospective adopters to be very open minded, not to be scared or put off when reading information about a child. Before deciding they aren't a suitable match, ask a lot of questions because I found O looked a lot more difficult on paper than he actually is. This potentially means children could miss out on being adopted because of not asking further questions.

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Katie, ARC Adoption NE

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Ask for as much information as possible, make sure everything is explained appropriately in a language you understand not medical jargon. Research the child's diagnoses, join Facebook pages and speak to other parents with similar conditions. The more information you can gather the better.

Susy*, Yorkshire Adoption Agency

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Accept that others may be a bit "scared" of how to help/ look after someone with a disability such as leaving them at a soft play party (when other parents had dropped theirs off). Check in with the lead parent/organiser that they are ok with their needs and advise if any different at all is needed.

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Barbara & Alison, Caritas Care



What advice would you give to someone thinking about adopting a child with additional needs?

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Other parents become your lifeline. Talk to as many as possible either on social media or local charities. These parents become your family, they help you fight when you need them too, offer endless advice and are always there with a cuppa.

Lyndsey*, Yorkshire Adoption Agency

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Maybe the most important aspect of considering adopting a special needs child is asking yourself if you can. Can you (and your partner) deal with the difficulties, social awkwardness which might come along, the dealings with educational needs, if physical impairments the struggle that may be part of that too.

Can you also accept the amazing love given back to you, see the smiles when that child succeeds at something which might be so easy for their peers, joy in realising they are so much more than people might think?

These are huge questions, each of which could have a huge impact upon you. As you think and analyse the questions and children involved, if the answer is yes to these and others that will surface then you are likely one who could adopt a child/children with additional needs.

Simon*, PACT

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Educational settings and Education Health Care Plans can be very tricky but there is lots of help (use your local Parent Carer Forum, or Local Authority SEND advisers).”

Barbara & Alison, Caritas Care

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Go into it knowing there will be both joys and challenges along the way, but be assured that there is help and support available when you need it. Never be afraid to seek support, and know that looking after yourself is important too. ”

Hannah, Caritas Care

**Names changed to protect identities*

www.cvaa.org.uk/agency-finder





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Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

www.cvaa.org.uk

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