**Welsh Early Permanence (WEP): Adam and Louise’s Story**

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Louise and Adam are adoptive parents to two wonderful little boys, Jack aged 3 and George just 8 months old. Their journey is unique, as they are one of the first families in Wales to support a child through Welsh Early Permanence. Having adopted Jack via the traditional adoption route, Louise and Adam were always of the view that their family had more room to grow and so when they were contacted by their adoption collaborative in 2022 and told that Jack’s birth mum was expecting another child, they were asked to consider WEP. Louise and Adam have been kind enough to share their journey, providing valuable insight into their experiences, of WEP as second time adopters.

At the start of their WEP journey, Adam and Louise had lots to consider especially the impact this plan may have had on their eldest son Jack. Adam and Louise were clear that this was their paramount concern going into the process and doing what was right for both boys was always their main focus *‘through all the uncertainty and emotions we kept them at the centre of our thinking and decision making. It was totally worth it to see the benefits it has brought to them and our family.’*

For the couple early permanence was something that they had always had in their mind, *‘we had an interest in early permanence. Having done some research, we asked about the possibility of pursuing this the first time we adopted. At that time there was no guidance and training available. We were told it wasn’t something that was on the cards and was available in England but not Wales. For us this was a disappointment because we saw the value in caring for a child at the earliest opportunity.’*

Since Adam and Louise first began their adoption journey, practice in Wales has progressed. In June 2022, the National Adoption Service launched the WEP framework and people wanting to grow their family through adoption can access information via their adoption service who can refer them to, a two-day training course which focuses specifically on WEP.

As WEP develops Wales wide it feels like a unique opportunity to offer support to a child where they have an older sibling who has already been adopted. Early planning in such cases has numerous benefits for the children involved and it was great to hear first-hand how WEP has had a positive influence on Adam and Louise and their boys.

*‘Having the chance to be WEP carers has brought a lot of joy to our family. As we had already adopted his brother it was an amazing feeling to be able to welcome this little one into our home. It has been such a wonderful time watching the two brothers build a bond and share time together from as early as possible. It has made an incredible difference to this little boy’s life to be placed with us from 4 months old, alongside his brother, rather than waiting until age 1 or older where a lot of firsts would have already happened. We have been a part of seeing him get his first teeth, sitting up independently, eating his first foods and seeing him go crazy for strawberries and cucumber – experiences that you cannot put a price on being a part of. During this time the bonds and attachments that have formed between us has outweighed any emotional times of uncertainty. He is now 8 months old and recognises us and his brother and has developed a wonderful little personality. We are able to respond to his needs and feel like we know him so well, whereas through the usual adoption route we would not have even met him yet! So, what has WEP brought to us as a family? Absolutely everything we have ever wanted! Two brothers united and a chance to become a family unit as early as possible.’*

On reflection the couple felt many of the positives were evident going into the process but in hindsight there was much more they had not considered in their preparation to become WEP carers.

*‘Taking him to his first medical appointments. We were able to discuss first hand any concerns we had and discuss any queries we had about his birth family health history with the agency medical advisor. We have seen so many firsts and made our own decisions on those, advocating for his needs as they emerged. One of the biggest parts of that was the concerns for his ‘flat head’ which progressed quickly with health professionals and the LA, and we were able to advocate for him to receive specialist treatment. Other examples are the little day to day experiences that have made life easier, such as some early food intolerance issues which we were able to see and support him through by changing his milk. We were also able to support him through his weaning stage and learn his likes and dislikes as they emerged. It felt valuable to be part of each of these precious milestones rather than being told this information later on. ‘*

When considering WEP keeping the child at the centre of decision making provides a strong motivation but for WEP carers it is important to acknowledge the heightened level of uncertainty they need to prepare for. For second time adopters worries about the uncertainty of WEP are often heightened as they consider the needs of their older child. *‘If it was the first time around, we may not have worried so much about these things, but our initial thoughts were around protecting and supporting Jack to the best of our ability.’* In Louise and Adam’s experience some of their initial concerns included safe information sharing with birth family, particularly in relation to the geographical location to them. *‘We were concerned that they may gain information about us for future use to find the boys before they were ready, which in the end they did not. However, it was important to have had this conversation with social workers and talk through our concerns.’*

Becoming WEP carers meant Adam and Louise would facilitate direct contact with George and his mother whilst decisions about his permanence plan were still being considered in court. This would be a big shift from their experience of contact with birth family when they adopted Jack. Up until this point the couple had not met birth mother and only exchanged letters via the letterbox scheme supported by their adoption agency. There was lots for them to think through.

*‘We did not really have concerns regarding the actual contact arrangements as we understood that it is part of the process, and it was really important for this little one to still see his birth Mum and vice versa until a final decision had been made on his future. It was clearly going to be difficult for us leaving him at contact, however that was not our main issue prior to contact sessions, it was more anxiety around protecting our first son and both of their futures. It was a very difficult and emotional time and became the main thing we really had to think about and discuss before proceeding with the WEP placement. After lengthy discussions with professionals, we came to a clear plan for contact that eased our concerns, protected Jack as much as possible, while still allowing us to facilitate contact as WEP carers.*

*In reality, contact* was *really difficult but not in the way we had predicted. The contact centre were incredible, they put things in place to help smooth the transition from us to Mum and vice versa. They were very understanding, took all the precautions needed to make George feel safe and gave Mum amazing support during a really difficult time. It was agreed that a family member was able to drive me (Louise) to contact as a support and this really helped more than I can express in words. On reflection, the most difficult part of contact was the part I thought I could cope with! I found as we built a stronger bond and attachment with George it was increasingly harder to leave him, and to see his face and his little happy personality change after some sessions; it broke my heart. It was also incredibly difficult to remain as ‘just a foster carer’ and not to let my heart run away with my head so to speak. Mum passed on messages through the contact staff and the contact book which were highly emotional, and often I was not prepared for them. I also felt a huge level of care towards Mum, often crying when I received messages that showed how much she was hurting, as well as a feeling of guilt that I was not just a foster carer but hoping to adopt the little boy she was still hoping to keep! It was the most difficult emotional thing I have ever done in my life! But the support of our family and friends kept us going and the joy of having the brothers together makes it all worth it.*’

Whilst direct contact brought about many emotional hurdles for the couple, the experience of contact also brought many positive aspects to their experiences that will strengthen their ability to support their children and their identity as adopted young people in the future.

*‘During contact Mum would buy him clothes, toys, jewellery, named blankets etc with a message to say that they were important and please could we keep them. Some of these he keeps and plays with and are in his bedroom and others are safe in his memory box. These things are so important for him to have and to know about when he is older.*

*During contact we had a communication book where we would write how he was doing and what he had been up to on the weekend for example with his brother. Mum would then write back a little about how he had been during the session and anything else she would like them to know when they are older. We have also kept this safe for him to read when he is ready. Contact is really important for that transition from birth family to their new adoptive family, so we feel that it has been a positive to be involved in this important time in his life. One day we can say that we took him to spend time with his Mum and she showed that she loved and cared about him during those sessions through how they played together, what she bought him and the things she said.’*

Hearing this it is clear that for many children where adoption is a likely outcome, WEP offers unique benefits to all aspects of their lives both in the short and the long term. Comparing their two experiences of adoption, firstly through the traditional route and secondly through early permanence, Adam and Louise feel WEP has given them a unique insight and knowledge to be able to share with the children. *‘It’s given us information about Mum that you can’t get from reading reports, we have also been able to capture our own thoughts and feelings throughout the process as we kept a diary. Everything that we can tell them is first-hand information as we were there to support them.’*

In their final reflections and thinking about others reading this story, Adam and Louise said the following:

*‘For anyone considering WEP we would say that the long-term impact and positives of having a child placed as early as possible far outweigh any negatives or emotional stress. For us as a family it has also been life changing, we never expected to have a baby and it has been a special time for us all.*

*However, it is not for the faint hearted as it has been one of the most difficult times of our lives. You need to be strong, determined, loving and have a good support network around you. Having been through the adoption process firstly and now WEP, we are able to see the positives and negatives of both sides. The positive of adoption means that the child’s plan has already been decided, you have more certainty, more information and you are welcoming that child into your family permanently from the start. The negative is that, that child has already had some level of trauma and has missed out on early stability, love and secure, predicable care, experiences that makes a huge difference as they develop.*

*The challenges of WEP is that it is highly emotional, you have limited information and the whole process is uncertain as you cannot be sure what will be the final plan for that child. This becomes difficult to deal with at times as you build your bond with the child. The positive is that the child is given love and stability earlier on and this reduces the amount of change and trauma experienced by them. All in all, WEP is a better outcome for the child, it is stressful and emotional for the WEP carer but a million times better for the child – so who wouldn’t give their all to protect and help a child?! We would do it all again in a heartbeat for another precious little one to be safe and loved as early as possible. We are so grateful to have been able to have our little one though WEP and we will forever thank all those who have supported our wonderful children.’*