

# 'Adopters, like children, come in all different shapes and sizes'

Every child should have a right to the security of family life, but a lack of adopters mean that one in every four children up for adoption will never know what it is like to have a loving mum and dad. Cathy Owen visited a charity trying to make a difference



**T**HE quote from one little girl says it all. "Hi, my name is Eve. I have been adopted. My mum couldn't look after me. Now I have a new family and I am very happy."

Eve is just one of the thousands of children who have been adopted thanks to the staff at the St David's Children Society in Cardiff.

Established nearly 70 years ago, it is the longest serving adoption agency in Wales and has placed more than 2,000 Welsh children for adoption.

And it has a brilliant record - in the last 100 adoption placements they

have a breakdown rate of just 3%, the lowest breakdown rate of any adoption agency in the UK.

But one of their biggest problems is having enough couples who want to adopt.

This year the staff are hoping to organise 35 adoption placements, which will result in one in every seven children placed for adoption in Wales being placed by the society.

Chief Executive Gerry Cooney is passionate about their work and is determined to try and dispel some of the myths that surround adoption.

"The Human Rights Act rightly emphasises the fact that every child should have a right to the security of family life," says Gerry. "Sadly one in every four children

available for adoption will never achieve an adoption placement primarily due to the fact that there are insufficient adopters coming forward to adopt them.

"Recent research found that many people are needlessly disqualifying themselves from adoption simply because they don't have the full facts.

"It found that 32% believed anyone over 40 was ruled out of adoption.

"Others thought you couldn't adopt if you were overweight, single or were unemployed. In reality adopters, like children, come in all different shapes and sizes and it is only rarely that a single factor will automatically exclude someone from being considered suitable."

■ For more information on adopting call 029 2066 7007.



■ Gerry Cooney

## Sam and Heather's story\*

Sam and his wife Heather decided to look into adoption after they were told they could not have any more children.

Their daughter was five but they didn't want her to be an only child.

After talking it over the couple, from Roath, Cardiff, decided to follow the adoption route and got in touch with St David's Children Society.

After showing an interest they were quickly sent on a course and went through the adoption process.

A year later they became the proud parents of a 13-month-old girl.

"The post adoption support we received was fantastic," says Sam. "The course was excellent too and made

the whole process so much easier. That was seven years ago and it has been so wonderful."

It was so good that the couple went on to adopt a second child, a boy, four years ago through the charity and they can't praise the help they received enough.

"It has been an amazing experience for us and our family," says Sam with pride in his voice.

"When we first adopted our daughter we were told that she was way behind developmentally and they said that she would never catch up. But two or three years later, she had blossomed so much and has totally caught up with her other school friends. It just shows how important it is for children to have love, care and security.

"It is not all about education. "When we first considered adoption I was concerned that we couldn't love a child as much as we did our birth daughter, who was a miracle child too.

"But I was totally wrong. Once we had been through the adoption and bonded I felt there was absolutely no difference, they are my children and we are their parents. It is fantastic."

■ Names changed to protect children's identity

## Rachel's story\*

Rachel Price's son tells people he isn't adopted any more because a judge told his new mum and dad were legally his.

The Bridgend mum brims with pride when she talks about cheeky, happy 10-year-old son, Rhys, she and her husband Jack adopted when he was six.

"It took us two years to make the decision to adopt, but once we got in touch with St David's the process was actually really quick," explains Rachel.

"It was not an easy decision, but the staff there made it so much easier.

"In the May we had a three-day training course at the beginning which was so helpful, then we had lots of application forms, like police checks and health forms to fill in over the summer. "Then in the October we were

appointed a social worker and by the start of the next year we had our little boy."

But Rachel admits their first meeting was nerve wracking and the first couple of months were quite difficult.

"The day we went to meet our son for the first time, I was absolutely terrified," she recounts.

"It just felt really strange meeting the little boy who was going to be with us for the rest of our lives.

And I was worried he wouldn't like us. I had been told so much about him beforehand that I had already started to bond with him, but what if he didn't like me?

"But we got there and he was so excited about meeting us.

"It went so well that by the next week he was living with us."

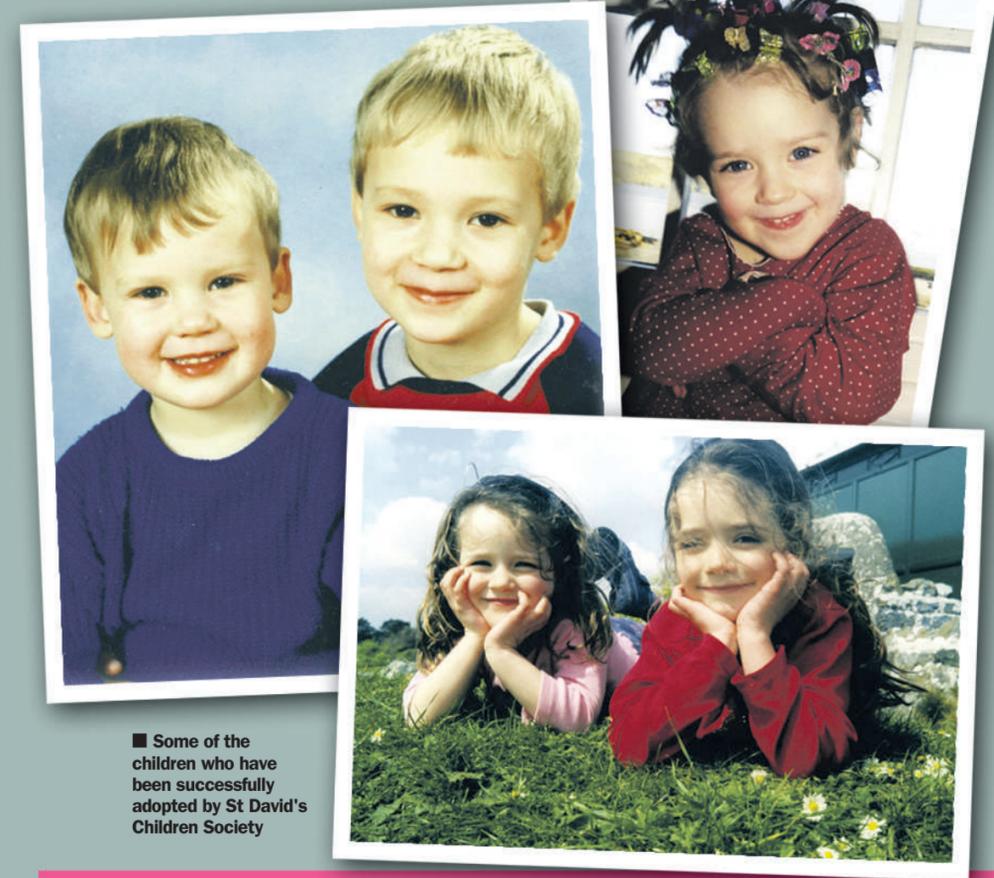
Rachel feels

that putting down boundaries right from the start helped with the settling in process.

"It was still a massive change for us," she says.

"About a week after he arrived I just burst into tears one night because I was so overwhelmed by it all. It has been fantastic and he is a normal, happy 10-year-old boy. I think it is really sad that lots of people only want to adopt little babies. Our son was nearly seven and people said he would be set in his ways and it would be difficult. But you would not believe the number of people who come up to me and say they can tell he is mine because he has the same mannerisms and lots say he is just like me."

■ Names changed to protect children's identity



■ Some of the children who have been successfully adopted by St David's Children Society

## Kevin's story

Like any father Kevin Fitzpatrick was proud when his 21-year-old son graduated with a 2:1 degree in the summer.

But Kevin had even more reason than most for this pride.

When he adopted Gerry, his elder brother Terry and younger sister Sue nearly 20 years ago, life could have been very different for the children.

"My wife and I had decided to adopt and we didn't really like the service we found at the local authority, and then we found out about St David's," explains Kevin, who is wheelchair-bound.

"They were amazing from the start. Like most couples starting out we were looking for an infant, but I was nearing the age of 40 at the time and we didn't want to go through the whole process again, so when we were told about two brothers and a sister aged three, four and six, we went for it.

"To say it was a shock to the system was an understatement, going from getting up on a Sunday at your own time and reading the newspapers to getting up at 6am and having to play football.

"But it was a very nice culture change."

Kevin admits it hasn't always been easy, but with Gerry having graduated and Terry and Sue both at university, he is delighted with their progress.

"They have all made incredible achievements," says Kevin, who has been chairman of the charity's board of trustees for the past 10 years.

"You don't adopt three damaged children and not have challenges.

"It was months before the boys even realised that Sue was their sister and I would still say it is a work in progress. But they have all achieved so much."