

Anne Neale from Support Not Separation speaking on “***Forced adoptions are not just historic – they are happening now. What can be done to address this?***”

Public Policy Exchange webinar on Adoption in the UK, 2 October 2025

Our coalition [Support not Separation](#), co-ordinated by Legal Action for Women (LAW), brings together organisations and individuals who have experienced or witnessed the damage caused by the arbitrary separation of children from their mothers (or other primary carers), and are determined to change this desperate situation. It includes organisations of single mothers, women of colour, women with disabilities, rape survivors, breastfeeding advocates, kinship carers, psychotherapists, men and former social workers.

Our Dossier [Suffer the Little Children and their Mothers](#) (2017) gives an overview of our experience with hundreds of women we have worked with – predominantly single mothers on low income, many of them Black women or other women of colour, immigrant, with a disability, and/or who went through the care system as children. Our most recent research, published in 2021 found that of 219 mothers, at least 76% had suffered domestic abuse, 44% were women of colour and/or immigrant women, and **10% had children who had been or were in the process of being adopted. In every case the mother/primary carer strenuously opposed the adoption**, including by representing themselves in appeals to the High Court when their legal aid had been stopped.

There is a common misconception that forced adoptions are a thing of the past, and if the government would just apologise, that would be some sort of justice. Of course, the government should apologise to the hundreds of thousands of women and their children who were forcibly separated during 50s-70s – and even though most of these adoptions were done through homes for unmarried mothers run by different Churches, the NHS was also involved, and they were all or nearly all funded by the state, so that amounts to state sanctioned forced adoptions.

During parliamentary debates on historic forced adoptions, MPs have said that such adoptions could not happen now because there is a court process. The fact is that **more than 90% of all adoptions in the UK take place without the consent of the birth family. 2740 children were adopted** in England and Wales in the year **up to March 2025**; the average age at which children are adopted is **3 ½ years**; there are almost **3000 children on a placement order waiting to be adopted**.

While a court order is now required, the judicial system has not protected mothers and children from this **most cruel abuse of power by the state**.

In 2020 the Ministry of Justice’s [Harm Review](#) confirmed our experience that women face a number of barriers in the family courts including “**sexism, racism and classism**” – and we would add, **disability discrimination**. And until earlier this year family court hearings which make such decisions were held entirely behind closed doors, with mothers not even being able to tell their families what was happening to them. Now, after a long campaign to open the courts which we’ve been part of, journalists and legal bloggers are allowed to

attend and report on family cases (with the judge's permission which can be withheld) that will hopefully mean that more of the truth about adoption will emerge. We expect the public, as well as prospective adopters, will be shocked.

For example, **recently**, [Judge Keehan](#) made an adoption order for three siblings, even though he acknowledged that, **"The parents deeply love their children and the children love them. There is no question, and never has been, that the parents are more than able to meet the basic care needs of the children."** So **why were they adopted?** The reasons the judge gave included the parents "extreme **over-reaction to the involvement of professionals** in their lives and those of their children, most especially social workers". Since when has getting along with social workers been a qualification for motherhood! Where is the law that says that!

It is not true that all or even most children who are adopted come from abusive homes from which they have been "rescued". In fact, many children are taken into care when **poverty is considered "neglect"**, when mothers who've suffered **domestic violence** are accused of harming their children because they couldn't escape and were given no help to do so, when **young mothers** who were raised in "care" have babies taken at birth on the assumption that they don't know how to be a parent, when disabled mothers and those with mental health problems are told they won't be able to "cope" with their children. It is deeply shocking that there are now almost **84,000 children in "care"**. Recent [research](#) found that **one in 200 babies born gets taken into care and the majority never go home to their birth families**

Often children get taken on the basis of an assumption by social workers, backed by judges, that at some point in the future a mother might cause her child "emotional harm", even when no actual harm has yet taken place. **Challenging a future "possibility" is virtually impossible especially if all the professionals involved predict it and back each other up.** And once one child has been taken it is most likely that subsequent children will be taken (although we worked to prevent that in at least one case). The Nuffield Foundation found that the risk of returning to court is higher for mothers who first gave birth when young and if the child in the first set of proceedings is subject to a placement order. In both England and Wales, a high proportion of mothers in recurrent care proceedings (**more than 40%**) are estimated to be **aged 14–19 at the birth of their first child** and [one in four](#) mums with children placed for adoption grew up in care.

To give you an idea of some of the mothers in our network who've been through forced adoption – one in the 80s and the other in 2015 I'd like to play their interviews now – the first was shown on Ch5 news early in 2023 and the podcast was produced by Natasha Phillips of Researching Reform in 2020

SLIDESHOW HERE

Other mothers/primary carers we have worked with include:

A young white working-class mother with a very mild learning disability who got no support to keep her child and whose family members were assessed as “not suitable” – **her baby had never suffered harm or neglect**, but was taken on the basis of “**possible future emotional harm**”, and the child was cut off not only from birth parents but two sets of grandparents who also loved her. They **were working class, her adopters middle class**, and as her **grandmother** told a public meeting in Parliament, this, like the forced adoptions you are looking at, was **social engineering**. The mother has gone on to raise a child with a new partner.

A young Black mother who had been raped as a teenager, again got no support, was told she did not know how to be a mother because she had spent a short period of time in care, and her baby was adopted away from a loving extended family. She too has another child she was “allowed” to keep.

A white working-class father desperate to keep his two young children after his wife was found unfit because of severe mental health issues was not allowed to keep them on the grounds that he would struggle to work and care for them at the same time (which every “working mother” and many foster carers do!), so they were adopted.

In all these cases, the children who were being forcibly adopted had suffered no harm – until they faced the trauma of separation from their mothers and wider families

Recently the death of baby Victoria and the harsh vindictive sentence of Constance Marten, convicted of gross negligence manslaughter has caused outrage among many people. Ms Marten was not allowed to speak about what had happened in family court which is that her **4 children had been taken (two at birth) and adopted** even though the court agreed that she and her husband loved the children and had a good relationship with them. Yet the judge in sentencing her to 14 years cited the family court proceedings to justify his refusal to consider her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as mitigation. She should have been **supported – not prosecuted**.

One case shows how the **mothers are held to a higher standard than adopters**. [Leiland-James Corkill](#) was removed from his mother who was a victim of domestic violence but had never harmed him, into a ‘foster to adopt’ placement: **‘foster to adopt’ was introduced in 2014** and means that babies taken at birth can be placed straight away with a prospective adopter. In court a judge says the baby is now settled with the adopters so it would be cruel to remove them and return them to their mothers no matter how hard a mother has proved she can parent and how hard she has fought to keep and get back her child. In the case of this little boy, **social workers ignored concerns about the adopters**, which is typical. His mother continued to fight in court but before the court process finished, he was murdered by the adoptive mother. His mum was denied the right to even hold him after death; **she had never once harmed her child** and no doubt he would be alive if he had been returned to her care.

The Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 state that the decisions made by the family court "must be **in the best interests of the child**". Yet, the **trauma of being separated from the person who loves you and is your first protector is ignored or dismissed**; the **unique bond** between a mother and her baby, which begins during 9 months in the womb is also ignored or disregarded. How is this in the best interest of the child?!

Evidence shows time and time again, that **children from working-class backgrounds are being "rescued" by middle class professionals** – much as was done in the **last century** to the children of single mothers not only in **Britain**, but **Ireland, Australia, Canada** . . . And the practice of many other countries (like Argentina, Chile, Spain) under dictatorships that stole children to give them to those involved in killing their parents. As with these historic cases, **abuse of power by state agencies and profiteering by private agencies** are at the root of child removals and forced adoptions.

Adoption is supposed to be a last resort, but **successive governments and ministers have promoted it** as the "gold standard", and an increasingly privatised "child protection" industry has added a **profit incentive**. Private fostering, care homes and adoption agencies make **millions** from the suffering of children and mothers. It is important to note that **local authorities** with **higher adoption rates** are also those who take more children into "care".

The current system promotes taking children, including for adoption rather than supporting families under **Section 17 of the Children Act**. There has been a **102% increase in removing children over the last 12 years** with spending increasing by **57% to 11 billion** whilst at the same time support to families has **decreased by 44% to 1.7 billion**. When children are adopted, the state ends its financial responsibility, whilst support in the community is paid for by the state. Supposed savings cannot be the reason since the state has been ready to pay **£300,000 a year and in some cases £1m a year** to private companies to keep a child in institutional care. Such profiteering from children's and families' misery is obscene. The only explanation is that some budgets (those funding increased control of professionals and profiteering by state and private agents) are prioritised over others (support for children and families).

The consequences for children who are adopted are often deeply traumatic. It's no wonder that so **many adopted children have a very difficult time especially as teenagers** – and often try to find their birth families on social media at this time, probably because they are more able to make their voices heard then. Although statistics are in short supply, it's estimated that **up to 20% of adoptions break down** whilst as recently reported in Parliament, **70% of adoptive families report that their children have significant social, emotional and mental health needs** including PTSD. While some people try to cover this up by blaming "difficult beginnings" ie an "unfit mother", it is in fact the trauma caused by the removal from their birth mother, the **denial of that primary natural bond of love and protection**. **Adult Adoptees** responding to a survey said that nearly **83%** had suffered emotional distress, and said yes, definitely" to the question of

whether they experience pain and loss, and **55.7%** reported a **pervasive lack of belonging**. Approximately **80%** of adoptees reported using "unhealthy coping mechanisms" to manage complicated feelings.

Adoption UK's own [research](#) shows that in the last 12 months

- Nearly one quarter (23%) of adopted children were known to have harmed themselves or attempted to do so;
- 75% of adopters felt it was a continuous battle to get the support their child needs;
- 29% of adopted young adults were not in education, employment or training (NEET) at the end of 2023, compared to a national average of 12%.
- Only 39% adult adoptees felt confident in getting help to access their records

The consequences for the mothers of children who've been removed can also be catastrophic especially because adoption completely cuts all ties both with immediate and wider birth families. **Mothers whose children have been removed are [14 times more likely to die prematurely](#)**, including because of ill-health, suicide, substance overdose and homicide. **What are the figures for children who have been forcibly removed and adopted? We urgently need to know.**

What must be done

The child welfare system needs a complete overhaul of its priorities so that **resources are put into supporting mums** and families who are living in poverty, including by giving mothers and other carers a **Care Income** for all the work of caring for people and the planet.

Spending on S17 must be put on a statutory footing, so support is funded and prioritised over removal. just as spending on S47 is.

Must be **recognition of the importance of the mother/child bond**

The **profit incentive must be removed** from all aspects of children's social care and local authority spending on removing children must be scaled down in favour of supporting mothers and families.

Forced adoptions are a violation of children and mothers' human rights. It must be made illegal and the practice of foster to adopt stopped. The "possible future emotional harm" used to justify this must be abolished. Forced adoptions are the most cruel abuse of power by the state. The UK is one of few countries that allow it. It must end! Only then can adoptive parents be reassured that the children they have adopted were not wrenched by force from the arms of a loving mother. In Neath Port Talbot which is one of the poorest areas in Wales and had the highest number of children in care, social workers have prioritised support instead of punitive intervention and the numbers of children taken has gone down significantly. Andy Bilson did the same in Fife in the 1980s.

The mothers, grandmothers and other family members we support, who have battled to keep their children in the face of a political and economic push to fast-track adoptions have a right to be heard. **Mothers want justice and an end to a practice based on sexism, racism, class bias and disability discrimination**, and on devaluing the bond between the child and the mother, denying the legal and human rights of both. We need support, not separation.

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