



The demands of academia can make it difficult to welcome a child into a family.

ADOPTING AS ACADEMICS: WHAT WE LEARNT

Our quest to bring a child into our family led us to confront academic working practices. **By Tony Ly & Nathan W. Bailey**

This month, we're celebrating an important milestone: one year since a court issued the legal order that made us adoptive parents to our son.

In 2016, we took the first step towards adoption when we contacted our local government council in Scotland. In our subsequent journey to becoming adoptive parents, we discovered that the process has unique challenges for academics, arising from common preconceptions around work–life balance and

pressures in academia.

All people who plan to adopt a child in the United Kingdom go through an extensive evaluation process. This is very intrusive by design, because social workers have a responsibility to put children's needs first. That means ensuring that prospective parents are resilient – a key asset when facing the considerable pressure and uncertainty of the adoption process. The evaluation culminates in a formal panel hearing, in which prospective

adoptive parents are asked questions by social workers, doctors, lawyers and community volunteers. Leading up to our own adoption panel, our life stories and personalities were forensically dissected by social workers. We anticipated some topics, such as our marriage and our support network, but others took us by surprise.

We were warned by social workers, for example, that our academic backgrounds could disadvantage us with the adoption

panel. This was because members might have preconceived ideas that academic workloads are not family friendly, or that academics are ‘tiger parents’ who demand unrealistic achievement from their children. We were asked whether we would be willing to prioritize our child over our careers if circumstances demanded it – a question asked of all adoptive parents. But as academics who have invested heavily in our careers, it was a major reality check for us to produce contingency plans such as being prepared to take an extended career break to deal with unexpected health or welfare issues that might emerge after the adoption. By notable contrast, our ethnicities (we have different ethnic backgrounds), our sexual orientation (we are gay men) and our nationalities (neither of us was a UK citizen at the time) were not raised as barriers.

Parenting priorities

It is safe to say that academia does not have a widespread reputation for supporting work–life balance – owing to both stereotypes about the personalities of academics, and perceptions of the demands and competitiveness of their careers. Two things helped us to address this concern with our social workers. The first was to challenge some of those stereotypes: we pointed to examples of highly respected colleagues who have children, some with significant additional support needs. There is no lack of nurturing parents in academia. We also noted the relative flexibility of an academic schedule, compared with the more rigid working days typical of other professions.

But we also tried to take the question on board, and we examined our own ways of working. We realized that changes were in order. We had to convey to our social workers that we would be able to put reasonable boundaries around our work commitments, and that meant developing assertiveness and self-discipline when it came to managing our workloads. We had to change ourselves and our relationship with work: no more staying in the office until 10 p.m. and then grabbing a takeaway meal.

Although adjustments to working life are inevitable for all new parents, what surprised us was that we had to walk through every scenario in detail and explain them to our social workers, all while still being unsure whether any child would ever be placed with us. What would we do if our child experienced a difficult transition to our home and could not be looked after by childcare providers when we returned to work? Could one of us leave academia to home-school the child? If you are an academic thinking of adopting, it is helpful to examine every aspect of your work–life balance – research schedules, conferences, fieldwork, commitments to your



Tony Ly, Nathan Bailey and their son created art together during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020.

research group – well in advance, and be prepared to explain how you will set healthy limits so that you can support your child.

Institutional attitude

Before our son was placed with us two years ago, we researched policies for adoption and shared parental leave (SPL) across a variety of UK higher-education institutions.

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We discovered striking differences; some institutions were more adoption-friendly than others. Some SPL policies require that paid leave at full salary be taken in the first 16 weeks after a child is placed, or the entitlement is lost. Others give the parent the freedom to decide when to take their allotment of full-salary leave over the course of 12 months. Flexible policies enable academic parents to share leave in a way that permits more one-on-one time with their children, lessens any negative impact on their research and teaching careers, and helps institutions to hire teaching replacements more efficiently, bolstering reputation and retention of faculty members.

Flexibility is crucial for adoptive parents for another reason. There is an enormous amount of uncertainty regarding the timing of a child’s placement. Although we were able to inform our employers that we had been

approved for adoption, there was no way to predict whether a child would be placed with us in one month, three months, two years or never. That made it tricky to plan teaching replacements and contingencies for research supervision. Our placement was eventually confirmed through a matching panel in June 2019, and our son was placed with us in August 2019, giving us and our employers less than three months to prepare the practicalities of running our research and teaching in absentia before our son’s arrival.

Furthermore, when we were first approved to adopt, in 2017, we were told that the child might be a newborn or as old as three years. By as late as March 2019 – nearly two years later – we still had no idea where the child might be in that range. The adoption process might be slow to start, but it crystallizes very quickly, which makes it difficult to plan ahead. This uncertainty is what makes flexible work and leave policies so important.

Love and support

We received immense personal support from our academic colleagues, which was incredibly helpful. Official policy goes only so far: workplaces that are generally family-friendly are likely to be friendly to adopters, so we advocate that academics considering adopting should cautiously gauge the social environments of their departments, and that institutions should cultivate good social environments.

Every adoption is unique, and there can be striking differences across countries and regions. We are originally from the United States, where adoptions routinely cost many tens of thousands of dollars. Our colleagues there are often surprised to discover that not only was our adoption free, but the local council provided a £500 (US\$670) start-up package to cover parenting essentials such as nappies, infant formula, clothing and car seats, to ensure that children have the best possible start with their family. The situation will differ elsewhere, and in many countries, including some in the European Union, we would not even be allowed to adopt because we are gay.

Adopting our son has brought so much love into our lives. He is three now, and the star of our show. Our friends, family and colleagues have been supportive. And, at the end of the day, academia allows flexibility in juggling family commitments that simply does not exist in a lot of other jobs. If you are considering adopting, we wish you the most positive experience possible.

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