

Ian and Josie adopted two girls, Lily and Amy, three years ago. Then, Lily was eight and Amy was six. They had the same mother. Both had backgrounds of severe neglect and abuse and had spent several years in foster care while social workers deliberated about whether to return them to their birth mum or arrange for their adoption. A boy sibling remained with the birth mother and while in care the girls frequently visited her.

From the beginning of their placement the girls both displayed issues of concern to Ian and Josie, such as tantrums, controlling behaviour, sibling rivalry, attention-seeking and

bed-wetting. Ian and Josie felt they needed to gain a better understanding of why the girls presented these behaviours and how they as parents could manage them better. They were recommended by their post-adoption social worker to undertake the Enhanced Adoptive Parenting Programme (EAP), a ten-session parenting course delivered by a trained parent adviser within their own home over a period of three months.

Here they give an account of their 'journey' over the duration of the programme.

# enhancing adoptive parenting

**W**E really felt that the programme had topics we needed help with and that it was very specialised. It appeared to reflect all of the behaviours that Lily and Amy displayed. The programme is for parents only - we had to make sure the children were well tucked up in bed, or being looked after by someone else, before we started each session. The girls were aware we were undertaking the programme but we did not allow them to feel it was about them but a general information course about children's behaviour and how parents can help them.

## session 1

This was aimed at getting us to put ourselves in the place of our children - to think about where they had come from, the story of their lives and how hard it must be to start out in a new, strange family.

As our children were adopted at a late age and had been in contact with their birth mother until then, they remembered a lot about their past - Lily would fill in the gaps of information that Amy did not know, mainly concerning the time before going into care. We already felt comfortable talking to the girls about their past, but it is only recently that Lily has opened up about the unpleasant experiences she remembers. We were lucky in that Lily had already done life story work with the post-adoption social worker.

For 'homework' we had to write down what factors we felt were relevant to understanding our children's behaviours, and to observe what the trigger situations were and whether our responses to the children's behaviour made a difference. We were always aware of their behaviours and what they meant. However, focusing on these questions led us to respond in a more sympathetic/therapeutic manner instead of installing strict boundaries which appeared not to work efficiently on previous occasions.

## session 2

This session concentrated on attachment and we were encouraged to consider the impact of poor attachment on our children's behaviour and the deep lack of self-esteem both children struggle with. We always knew Lily had attachment problems; we were able to identify what situations would trigger this and we became more aware of when we would see these attachment issues. We changed the way we responded and it appeared to work, i.e. the attachment was managed more appropriately. (However, this



doesn't mean that the bad behaviour stopped, because of course it didn't!).

### session 3

In session 3 we looked at children's behaviour as a mirror of their feelings and the fact that attention-seeking behaviours can be either positive or negative. Josie said: "I started to feel like a psychiatrist and I found most of their behavioural issues can be seen when they interact with each other. They have intense sibling rivalry which I still observe and I am constantly analysing. I often do this when taking and collecting them from school. I have reflected a lot on Lily's controlling behaviour and Amy's temper tantrums. I have now come to the conclusion that they are both linked together and that Lily has a lot of control over Amy's emotions. I am still learning to control these situations before they escalate into something more."

Both girls act much younger than their age but while doing this programme we felt it was acceptable for them to be allowed to behave like this. There have been complaints about this behaviour from school/social clubs, but we've come to admit that if people make unpleasant comments then this is the wrong environment for the children. "I acknowledge now that some of the behaviour will not change but I have a greater understanding of it and I am more sympathetic towards this."

**“ We also learnt new techniques about being clear and precise about what the children were expected to do. We felt the boundaries were clearer, and the girls were less naughty and pushing boundaries was reduced. ”**

### session 4

In session 4 we were encouraged to spend ten minutes a day in special play with the children. Our homework for the week ahead was to do the special play and monitor the responses of the children.

We played with play dough for 15 minutes every day and recorded what happened during these sessions. We

noticed that sometimes the family was together as a whole, but sometimes Lily stayed isolated and wanted to control everything. We also photographed some of the things we made with the play dough.

### session 5

Following on from the special play, session 5 concentrated on using verbal praise. During the week that followed, we praised them more. The programme suggested we praise for even the smallest things. As a result the children appeared to be less stressed during certain times of the day that were difficult for them, e.g. getting ready for bed/getting washed/dressing for school/doing homework.

### session 6

In session 6 we were taught some strategies for giving commands and setting boundaries - clarity, eye contact, calm voice etc. In the week that followed we set up a couple of new family rules. We also learnt new techniques about being clear and precise about what the children were expected to do. We felt the boundaries were clearer, and the girls were less naughty and pushing boundaries was reduced.

### session 7

Session 7 was about how and when to ignore - not as easy as it sounds! We used ignoring sometimes before we began the course. We continued even more during and after the programme. It was sometimes difficult when we had to continue the ignoring more than we expected.

Eventually the effect was that the behaviour would stop but only after a certain period of time had been reached.

### session 8

This was about consequences and the importance

of using them immediately not later. We had always found giving consequences difficult - sometimes it would work, sometimes it would not and it would set off a series of tantrum behaviours, e.g. not getting dressed in the morning for school, no TV/computer in the evening. This seemed to depend on their moods. Sometimes they did not want to get dressed or go to school so the consequence had no effect and the only behaviour we would receive would be crying and tantrums.

### session 9

Session 9 looked at encouraging problem solving and taking responsibility. Our girls now being 11 and nine, this is an important area to work on, particularly as Lily has just started secondary school and her behaviour is sometimes perceived as 'unacceptable'. Throughout our time with the girls we have found that they both have a distorted view about their actions. What would appear to be good/bad behaviour they can recognise in people around them but they are unable to change it in themselves and cannot explain why they do certain things; e.g. Lily will sometimes do things she's not supposed to many times in a day; she does not know why she does it but will 'tell off' her sister if she does the same.

We continually problem solve with them; however, the problems continue.

### session 10

We used this last session to review strategies learnt during the programme. We felt that our knowledge of therapeutic parenting was greatly increased and the strategies that were offered to us were excellent, and we implemented as many of them as we could. The children's behaviour is continuing as before but we feel better prepared for some of the challenges we face on a day-to-day basis. Family 'togetherness' still varies due to Lily's controlling behaviour i.e. we have both good and bad days.

Overall we felt the course had been tailored for us as a family and we did not feel alone as parents, knowing that a lot more adoptive parents have and are experiencing the same as us. It was a pity the course had not been offered to us three years ago when we first got Amy and Lily. ●

### Further information

EAP is an evidence-based individualised parenting programme for adopters and permanent carers facing challenging behaviours in children aged three to eight years recently placed from care. The EAP programme is carried out over ten sessions by PAC-trained parent advisers on a one-to-one basis in parents'/carers' own homes, or at another convenient venue.

**For more information contact your social worker or PAC ([advice@pac.org.uk](mailto:advice@pac.org.uk)). The EAP programme has been designed by Professor Alan Rushton and Dr Helen Upright.**