

Supporting those who **adopt** or **foster**

A Care for the Family guide for churches

Welcome



As foster carers and adoptive parents, my wife and I have been so encouraged by the support we have received from our small church.

It gives church leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth workers and small groups an introduction to the experiences of such families, and provides some great tips on how churches can welcome and support them.

One of our foster children, Mark, struggled to settle in church services due to his traumatic background and ADHD. One dad sat with us and offered to draw for Mark whatever he ordered. Each week, to Mark's delight – and giggles – a bicycle, speed boat or racing car would be sketched. It was a small gesture, but it made the service something to look forward to.

Sadly, it's not always this way. Sunday mornings can be the most difficult time of the week for families that foster and adopt. The struggle it takes to get the family to the service can be exhausting, but once there, the disapproving looks, the tuts or an unhelpful comment, can make them wonder if it's worth it.

We believe the Church is well placed to find a home for every child who needs one. But it's essential that the whole church family wrap around those who foster and adopt to support them.

We are extremely grateful to Care for the Family for producing this booklet.

For children at risk of being pushed to the fringes of society, fostering and adoption is an opportunity for them to experience not only the love of a stable home, but the acceptance of an entire church. It doesn't just change the child's life – it can change your whole church. I will never forget the day we said goodbye to one of our foster children as he moved on to live with his adopted family. Our church family had really come to love his cheeky smile and winning personality. As our pastor carried him around the church so he could personally 'high five' the entire congregation, we were all trying to smile, but it was hard to fight back the tears.

I pray that you too will know the privilege, joys – and tears – of welcoming such children into your church lives, and that this booklet will help you along the way.

Krish Kandiah

Founder and Director
Home for Good

Introduction

With newspaper headlines frequently declaring that there are more children than ever in the care system, and with high-profile stories of children who have suffered abuse or neglect, the issue of 'looked after children' is rarely out of the news these days.

But have you ever paused to think about what this means for your church?

It's entirely possible that in your church, Sunday school, youth group or toddler group, there are a number of adoptive parents, foster carers, or kinship carers (for example grandparents raising their grandchildren). And it's likely that they and their families are facing many challenges. There may also be parents whose children have been taken into care, or adults who were adopted or fostered themselves as children.

This booklet aims to give you a window into the world of those who adopt or foster in particular. We also hope it will inspire you as to how the church can make a difference to some of our most vulnerable children and their parents or carers.

The church can be a source of tremendous support for adoptive parents, foster carers and kinship carers, but it can also be a place where they or their children feel misunderstood, isolated or even criticised. This is what some parents and carers told us about their experiences at church.

"Our three foster children have been with us for two years now. They regularly come to church with us, but no one has ever invited any of them round to play with their children."

"The church leadership and personal friends helped us pray through the initial decision to adopt and were very supportive."

"People at church have asked us, 'So you're not able to have children of your own?' At times we have felt like running away from the church."

"When we hit a really bad patch, the church 'pulled out the stops' to support us practically."

"Church is a difficult place to bring my boys, as they have attachment issues and don't fit the norm."

What are **fostering** and **adoption**?

Fostering provides children who cannot live with their own families with a temporary family home. Some foster carers focus on providing short-term respite cover, and others may have a child placed with them for several years. Children may be returned to their birth family or may move on to be adopted. Parental responsibility remains with the relevant local authority who share it with the birth parents.

Adoption is the process whereby one child or several siblings who cannot be brought up within their birth family become full, permanent members of a new family. Adopters become the child's legal parents with the same rights and responsibilities as if the child was born to them.

Kinship caring is the term used when family members (for example grandparents) or close friends care for a child full time while their own parents are unable to appropriately do so – perhaps because of substance misuse or a violent partner.

Special guardianship means that the child is not adopted, but lives with carers who have parental responsibility for them until they are grown up. The child is no longer the responsibility of the local authority.

Attachment is the profound and deep connection established between a child and caregiver in the early years of life. It's a basic human need, and children with secure attachments have the foundation they need to form a sense of themselves as lovable, worthy and capable.

'Attachment disorder' describes a variety of behaviours which may arise after a child has lost their 'primary carer' or has experienced neglect in their early years. Children can become overly anxious to please – desperate to do anything to avoid being abandoned again. Some express their chaotic feelings in chaotic behaviour. Others turn in on their own pain and withdraw, unable to relate to others.

Why do adoptive parents and foster carers **need support**?

For many of us, if we think about it at all, we might still imagine adoption as a baby given up at birth – and a 'happy ending' for an infertile couple who have longed for a child.

But the reality today is very different.

- Sixty-two per cent of children in care are there because they have suffered abuse or neglect from their birth parents.¹
- The vast majority of children placed for adoption have been removed from their birth families by Children's Services for their own safety – not given up voluntarily by the parents.
- Many are suffering the lifelong effects of foetal alcohol syndrome, disabilities or conditions such as autism. Sixty-eight per cent of looked after children have a special educational need (SEN).²
- Children in care may have suffered multiple moves, disruption and loss. All have suffered the loss of having to leave their birth parents. They may feel insecure, confused or scared.
- Many will be experiencing attachment disorder, and may withdraw or be aggressive in a bid to keep themselves safe in a world they perceive as dangerous. They may display some of these traits:
 - Poor impulse control
 - Poorly developed conscience
 - Developmental delays
 - Extreme control issues
 - Destructiveness
 - Cruelty, severe taunting
 - Problems with wetting and soiling
- About a quarter of adoptive parents face major challenges with children who have multiple difficulties. Parents become physically and mentally exhausted, and marital relationships become strained.³

"We faced much more severe problems than we had anticipated. Off the scale hyperactivity; disassociation; institutionalised behaviours (orphanage rocking, head banging and swaying); sexualised behaviours; soiling and smearing faeces; 'freezing' for hours at a time; etc."

1. *Children looked after in England, including adoption*, Department for Education, Dec 2013.
2. *Outcomes for children looked after by local authorities*, Department for Education, Apr 2014.
3. *Beyond the adoption order: challenges, intervention, disruption*, Department for Education, Apr 2014.

Why should the church get involved?

It can be tricky knowing how to support such families; perhaps it's tempting not to get involved. But God's concern for orphans and the fatherless is explicitly stated at least forty times in the Bible.

God makes clear his unchanging desire that his people should 'look out' for the lowest and the least. Psalm 82:3 exhorts God's people to "defend the weak and the fatherless"; just as he himself does (Deuteronomy 10:18). The same message is conveyed in the New Testament. James tells us, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27).

There are children living close to our churches with broken bones because

a parent has attacked them. Some are wondering if they will have to be separated from a sibling – the only person in the world they know that loves them. There are children who have never been to the seaside, never been shown how to ride a bike, never had someone sit and read a book with them. If no one adopts them, there are young children who are likely to end up homeless or in prison, because this is the most common future for them once they 'age out' of the care system.

Christians have the assurance that God has seen our desperate need and has chosen to adopt us into his family. The Bible tells us that, "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 1:5). Our lives and our futures have been transformed because of God's compassion and kindness towards us. As people who have received God's unconditional love and adoption, we are called to reach out and show his love to those in need around us.

What better place for adoption and fostering to take place than in the church, a family within a family whose members have themselves all experienced adoption into that larger family? Is the church ready to take on the challenge? To say to these children, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9)?

Where do we start?

Not everyone will be in a position to foster or adopt. But it's important that the whole church understands some of the ongoing challenges these children may face, and how it can best support them and those who are caring for them.

It's good to talk

Adoptive parents and foster carers are as varied as anyone else. Some will speak openly about their children being adopted; others may prefer to keep it quiet, perhaps to avoid their children being marked out as 'different'. Their circumstances vary too. Some foster carers may take children in an emergency for just a few weeks, or a child may be



placed with them for many years. Kinship carers could be dealing with their grief over a son or daughter who is no longer fit to parent, while at the same time struggling to cope as an older person with needy young children who are disturbed and unsettled.

So the best place to start is simply by talking to the parents and carers involved. Ask them what they need, ask them how their life is, and really listen.

Sensitivity is key

There may be people in the church who are affected by fostering or adoption issues in ways that others are unaware of. It's important to speak about these topics and not 'sweep them under the carpet', but be sensitive to the possible emotional impact, and seek to listen and learn from those who are more knowledgeable.

Growing in understanding

We asked parents and carers what they would love people in their church to know. Here are some of the issues that were raised.

Please don't say, "All children are like that" or "Don't worry, he'll grow out of it." This usually displays a lack of understanding and can sound very unsympathetic.

When we have to say goodbye to a child who is going back home or on to adoption, we feel an agonising wrench at being separated from them. Please don't say, "Oh, I could never foster; I could never let them go!" It feels as if you're saying that we are heartless or don't love them. It does hurt when they leave, but we do it because it's for their best. The foster children may only be with us for a few months, but we love them like they are our own.

Please try to look beyond the 'naughty' behaviour – you will probably find a child who is frightened and overwhelmed.

Please try to avoid asking personal questions in front of the children like, "Is their mum an addict?" or "Well, they aren't your real kids are they?" or "Are you going to adopt them?" Some of these things are confidential, and it's upsetting for children to hear people speculating about their future or their birth families whom they may love very much.

Kinship care presents many of the same needs and challenges as foster care but with no respite, no financial provision and often very little support from social services.



Try not to look at us strangely if we are bottle feeding a child at an older age, still using a dummy, or playing babyish games with them. They may have missed these experiences in their early lives, and filling in the gaps is proven to help the brain make the connections that most children develop naturally.

All have special needs simply because they have been removed from their birth parents.

The celebration of Mothers' or Fathers' Day can be a painful time for families. It will help if the church talks about 'parents and carers' and is sensitive to the mixed emotions that adopted and fostered children will be feeling on those days.

Love is not enough – please don't think that just because they've been with us for a few years, "Surely they should be all right now!"

Fostered children will almost certainly not have experienced anything like a church meeting before. As a result they are unlikely to behave in the way expected of children who have been attending with their parents for years.

These children need specialist therapeutic parenting to help them recover from early abuse or neglect. It can take a lifetime. Brain connections have been formed differently so the children have a different 'blueprint' which parents and carers are trying to change, and it's not easy.

How can we help?

Catch the vision

Jesus praised those who reach out to those in need: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35). Foster carers and adoptive parents have opened their doors and invited in children who had nowhere to call home. Encourage and support them as those who are carrying out a vital part of your church's mission and service to the community. Recognise that they may not be able to give the time to other church work that they once did. They may be too busy or just too tired!

"Caring for vulnerable children through fostering and adoption may be a ministry that is not yet fully recognised by all churches, but to God it is a ministry that is flawless. It is pure and acceptable to God."

Encourage people during the assessment process

The application process for those who wish to adopt or foster is naturally rigorous, as social workers seek to find the right carers for vulnerable children. It involves a thorough assessment of every aspect of their lives and is also an opportunity for applicants to consider whether this is really for them. It can feel like a real roller coaster of emotions, and applicants will value your prayer support and encouragement during the ups and downs.

"The application process is unbelievably intrusive and very emotive, and it often leaves you feeling very drained. It would be quite easy to pull out."

Be consistent over a period of time if possible

Any support will be valued, but reliable ongoing support will be worth its weight in gold. For families and carers who are in it for the long haul, people willing to walk the journey with them will be treasured.

"One lovely, childless, elderly lady was particularly supportive of me and our daughter. She told me I could ring any time day or night and carried us in her prayers (and still does). She also kept in touch with our daughter through lovely letters and cards."

Recognise those in your congregation who adopt or foster

Adoption and fostering is not for everyone, and as the church leader you may not be personally involved. But don't let that disqualify you from encouraging and endorsing those who are. It will make a tremendous difference if the leadership give the clear message that these parents and carers are valued and their children are welcome in the church. Taking part in the annual Adoption Sunday (see the Home for Good website) and speaking from the front about adoption and fostering will raise the profile, and your attitude will 'set the tone' for the congregation.

"A few individuals have been really helpful but the leadership has been neither helpful or unhelpful. They have seemed nonplussed, which has been disappointing. I just think it would have been good to have been endorsed by them, as it would have encouraged more people to be a help to us."

Respect the boundaries

Not everyone will know a child is adopted, and it's important that leaders don't tell others without the adopter's permission. Respect the fact that some adopters want to feel like any other parent or may not want to get into long conversations on the topic.

It can also be tempting to want to know all about the child's background or challenges. Parents and carers are often not permitted to divulge much

Welcome and accept the children

Many adopted or fostered children will have little or no experience of church services. They may display challenging behaviour that seems threatening or disruptive. Will they feel welcome by your church or disapproved of and ignored?

"The support came from individuals who welcomed the children into their homes and befriended them. Above all they needed to fit in and be accepted for who they were. My church was understanding about some of the bad behaviour, but not everyone is."

"It would be nice if other kids in church invited our foster children round to their homes – this has never happened."

Train your youth and children's workers

Share this information with key workers in the church, including home group leaders and those who work with parents, children or young people. See 'Want to know more?' on page 17.

about their children, so avoid asking too many questions.

"The biggest challenge has been social media and having to explain why photos can't be put on Facebook. It feels it can go against the grain when the culture in church is often so trusting."

"The church has loved the children we have fostered and welcomed them. They have prayed for us and accepted we cannot give confidential details about the children or their circumstances."



Seek to understand the families' world

The care and love you show by taking the time to listen and really understand will make a huge difference to parents and carers who may feel misunderstood and isolated.

"It would be great to feel that the church understands that adoptive parents are not superheroes, and that the victory has not been won once the child is rescued and placed in your family. That's sometimes where the drama and the hard work begin and, unlike birth children, it's a slow, painful, upside-down, inside-out struggle which, at worst, can lead to family breakdown."

Welcome the families into your toddler group

Is your group a welcoming environment for adoptive parents, foster carers, and kinship carers such as grandparents? Can children be welcomed and cared for appropriately, even if they have had a difficult start in life and may behave in a challenging way?

If your toddler group has a waiting list, consider implementing a policy that you will reserve an open place for foster carers whenever a child is placed in their care. You could also contact your local authority's fostering and adoption team, and encourage them to tell their adoptive parents and foster carers about your provision.

Show an interest in the children

Most children in care have been removed from their extended families, and ongoing contact may be severely limited. Foster children in particular can feel valued and loved if surrogate 'aunties and uncles' within the church can take an interest, attend sporting events or other functions, remember their birthday, or show enthusiasm when they take part in church activities. Simple activities such as inviting a child to accompany them in walking the dog, doing some gardening together, or taking part in an activity such as golf or fishing, can mean a huge amount to the child – and also provide the parent or carer with a much-needed break.

Link parents and carers together

Offer to link parents and carers to others in similar situations, and tell them about the Home for Good initiative (www.homeforgood.org.uk). You could also encourage the creation of an informal support group for mutual encouragement.

"Knowing that others have experienced the same issues or problems, and that it's not just us, has been so reassuring. It's so encouraging to meet with like-minded people and to share our joys and difficulties too."

Pray with and for the families

Ask the parents and carers how the church can best support them and the children in prayer.

"Many pray regularly for me and the child I care for."

Supporting parents and carers in their parenting

Managing behaviour in a traumatised child requires very different strategies. So ask the parent or carer how you can best support them as they deal with their child within the church, and trust that they know what they are doing.

Some children can be indiscriminately affectionate – crawling on to people's knees or holding strangers' hands, for example. This might seem adorable, but it will help parents if you take their lead regarding how to respond. It may not be appropriate for a new baby or child to be passed around for hugs and cuddles in the early months. This is not due to a lack of trust but because the child needs to learn to attach to their new parents, and it can be detrimental if they are seeking comfort, snacks or guidance from many different adults.

Many commonly-used parenting approaches, such as rewarding good behaviour (for example reward charts) or using 'time out' for poor behaviour, can be counter-productive for children who have experienced trauma and who believe deep down that they deserve to be rejected. Adoptive parents and foster carers will have undergone extensive training in attachment issues and 'therapeutic' parenting. Beware offering 'helpful' suggestions or assuming they must be doing something wrong if their child is 'naughty'.

Sometimes adopted or fostered children may be well-behaved at school or in church but extremely challenging at home. The temptation is to think, "It must be the parents' fault. They should set firmer boundaries for her." Our spoken or unspoken disapproval can be devastating.

The 'good' behaviour at church or school may actually be caused by fear. This is not the healthy fear that arises from having known good boundaries and respect but the terror that comes from having experienced abuse or unpredictable situations. When the child starts to feel less secure, outside of the home, they 'shut down' to avoid drawing attention to themselves, in fear of what may happen. At home, the child may feel safe enough to express some of the hurt, anger and confusion inside – often in the form of seemingly 'bad behaviour'.⁴

"Therapeutic parenting is so different from natural parenting, and people who have their own children can be quick to criticise 'alternative' parenting styles."

⁴ With thanks to John Steley for these thoughts, elements of which were published as an article in *Evangelicals Now*, Feb 2014.

Practical support

Take the initiative in offering support

All of us can find it hard to ask for help – even more so when you have spent many months working to assure social workers that you have all the abilities and resilience necessary to successfully care for an adopted or fostered child. Create a supportive atmosphere within the church where parents or carers can admit if they're not coping, without it seeming like a huge failure. It's also important that parents and carers continue to link in to their social workers and that churches know when it's time to encourage people to seek professional support.

"It's hard to bear the, 'Well, you chose to do it' attitude when things are tough."

"We often get comments to the effect that life must be all hunky dory now as she is well settled in her family. But the issues caused by her history of neglect and abandonment are still having a constant impact on her and us as a family. Explaining this to people over and over again is very wearing and we often just don't have the energy to do so."

Provide respite

All parents need a break occasionally, and it is well known that the arrival of a new baby can put strain on even the strongest relationship. Imagine the effect of the arrival of several children, possibly with additional needs and traumatised by the move from their previous carer, never mind their life before that. Some children, as a result of the trauma and hurt they have been exposed to in their short lives, can prove to be extremely challenging. For adoptive and foster families, respite care is not a luxury but an essential. Carers need a strong network of support in order to cope well – and where better to find this than within a compassionate and committed church family.

"My church has been wonderful. Several members have agreed to be vetted and DBS checked as part of the approval, and these now form the core of my babysitting team!"

"We would love the church to encourage babysitting so that adoptive parents can have a weekly night out to recharge their batteries as a couple."

Offer practical care

This can take many forms. Here are just a few things we've heard that churches and individuals are doing:

- Offering to act as 'back-up' if a crisis with a foster child were to prevent a family from picking up their son from football practice.
- Helping the carers find suitable baby clothes, toys or pushchairs when a new child was fostered – often at very short notice.
- Taking two adopted children out for tea once a week to give the parents or carers a break.
- Providing financial support. Some adoptive parents have had to step back from their careers in order to provide the intensive care and support that their children need. There may also be extra financial pressures – for example therapy sessions, respite care, or extra support for various activities.
- Offering DIY help to prepare a home for a social services assessment. For example, building a fence in the garden for safety reasons before a family can foster; or helping to make repairs if a foster child has damaged the home.
- Providing references for those considering adopting or fostering.
- Offering to take care of all the laundry so the parents are freer to spend time forming those important bonds of attachment with the child.

"A member of the congregation paid for us to go to Spring Harvest when we had just moved on a child with disabilities after two years. And we've had cards, flowers and meals when a new placement has arrived, prayer support and babysitting."

Offer support when the children arrive

When foster carers or adoptive parents take in a new child, it's usually a very demanding and stressful time. Encourage people in the church to make meals for them and offer practical support – just as you might do for a parent who has given birth to a new baby.

"Practical support for us has been amazing. Even to the extent of people bringing us meals when the children first came to us and asking what help we needed. The best thing for us was how excited everyone was about the process and that they treated us like normal expectant parents."

Turning words into action

1. Talk to adoptive parents, foster carers and kinship carers in your congregation. Ask them how they feel they have been supported in the past, what they would like the church to be aware of, and how the church can provide support in the future.
2. Draw up a plan with the parents and carers, to ensure that where possible their support needs are met. There may be needs that the church isn't equipped to meet, but expertise will increase with time, and recognition of the needs is a good first step.
3. Contact Home for Good to arrange a training session on the basics of adoption and fostering for church leaders, home group leaders, children's and youth workers, and any who are interested.
4. Appoint a specific person in the church to take responsibility for being well informed about the issues surrounding adoption and fostering and for coordinating support for those involved. Ensure they are registered as a Home for Good 'champion'.
5. Make available printed information on the Home for Good initiative, and signpost people towards the Home for Good website.
6. Take part in Adoption Sunday, organise a Home for Good information evening, or become a Home for Good church – affirming the Home for Good vision and making it known that you are a church that welcomes families that foster and adopt.

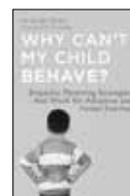


Want to know more?

Visit the Home for Good website (www.homeforgood.org.uk) where you can find many more resources:

- Short films that can be shown in church, sharing the vision for adoption and fostering
- Information on how the application process works for adoption and fostering
- Details of Adoption Sunday and how your church can get involved, or become a Home for Good church
- More support information for those who have adopted or are fostering
- Links to organisations who can help with other related situations – for example, supporting those who have been adopted, or whose children are being taken into care

The following books will also give more insight:



Why Can't My Child Behave?

Dr Amber Elliott
(Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

A readable, practical but thorough book which explains why adopted and fostered children need 'therapeutic parenting' and how to go about it.



Home for Good

Krish Kandiah (Hodder & Stoughton)

Krish shares a compelling vision of how the church can and must make a difference in the lives of

vulnerable children.



No Matter What

Sally Donovan
(Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

A gripping insight into what it's like to go through the journey

of coming to terms with infertility, the adoption process, and parenting traumatised children.



Working with looked after or adopted children in school

Hertfordshire
County Council

Lots of useful tips on how to understand and respond to the children's behaviour in a learning environment. Particularly useful for children's and youth workers.

www.hertsdirect.org/services/healthsoc/childfam/fostadoptsharecare/

Tell us your thoughts!

We'd love to know what you think of the material in this guide. Has it helped to inform and inspire you? Has it resulted in you or your church doing anything differently to support those who adopt or foster? Your comments, criticisms

and ideas would be very welcome. Please contact us by phone, post or email using the details on the back cover. You can also give us your feedback via a brief survey at www.surveymonkey.com/s/afbooklet. Thank you!

Safeguarding

It is important to bear in mind child protection measures when church members are encouraged to support and possibly befriend vulnerable children. The interests of the child must always be at the forefront. Be sure to be guided by the parents or carers themselves. They will know what is appropriate and must be comfortable with any arrangements that are made.

Churches have an incredibly valuable role to play in providing a supportive community around those who adopt or foster. Parents and carers need people who can listen to them, offer practical support, lift them up in prayer, and much more. The children need those who can accept them, not judge them, listen to them, and be

there for them. All of this has the power to transform lives.

It's essential to recognise though that sometimes specialist help or therapy will also be required, and it is better if this is sought sooner rather than later. Churches should be wise about when they need to encourage parents or carers to seek such specialist help, without seeing this as a failure on the part of the individual or the church. Please note that counselling and specialist support for adoptive parents is regulated by Ofsted.

If you have any concerns related to possible abuse or to the safeguarding of children or vulnerable adults, call CCPAS for specialist expert advice. Their helpline number is 0845 120 4550.



Care for the Family seeks to strengthen family life and to help those who face family difficulties.

We provide parenting, relationship and bereavement support through our events, resources, courses, training and volunteer networks. Our work is motivated by Christian compassion, and our resources and support are available to everyone, of any faith or none. Find out more at www.careforthefamily.org.uk.

This guide was produced by Care for the Family as a contribution towards the Home for Good initiative. We have sought to listen to the views of parents and carers and give you an insight into their world. Please note however that we are not qualified professionals in this field, and we cannot accept responsibility for any claim, loss or damage resulting from following the suggestions in this booklet.



Home for Good exists to find a home for every child that needs one.

We want to make sure that the crisis in the UK care system is on the Church's agenda. We want to encourage Christians to consider fostering and adoption – dispelling many of the common myths that exist. And we want to ensure that churches are inspired and equipped to support families that foster and adopt.

Home for Good was first launched in March 2013 as an initiative of Care for the Family, CCPAS and Evangelical Alliance. After a hugely successful first year, Home for Good was established as a charity in its own right in September 2014 to inspire, coordinate and equip our growing network of individuals and churches to make the Home for Good vision a reality.

Home for Good is still working with our founding partners, to make the biggest impact we possibly can.

Find out more about Home for Good and how you can get involved at www.homeforgood.org.uk.



Produced by Care for the Family, as part of the Home for Good initiative.

Care for the Family, Garth House, Leon Avenue, Cardiff, CF15 7RG
Tel: 029 2081 0800 Email: mail@cff.org.uk
Web: www.careforthefamily.org.uk

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