



Debbie (middle) with her family on holiday in Florida this year

# Mum to mentor

**Debbie Blenkarn** shares her journey from adopting three young children nine years ago, to becoming a mentor for other families who are now going through the adoption process

**A**doption rates in England have dropped significantly in recent years, despite the number of children in care rising.

There were more than 70,000 children in care at the end of March 2017, while the number of adoptions fell from 5,360 in 2015 to 4,350 in 2017.

Debbie Blenkarn, Yorkshire North East Quality Contract and Performance Manager, is passionate about encouraging others to adopt, after she and her partner adopted three young siblings nine years ago – an experience she has found incredibly rewarding.

“We adopted a 4-year-old girl, 3-year-old girl and 20-month-old boy. My partner and I went to the house, knocked on the door and these three little children looked up at us and asked, ‘Are you our new mummies?’ And we said, ‘Yes.’ The rest is history.”

Adoption immediately felt right for Debbie and her partner. “We decided against IVF and we thought that children would never happen for us. One day, adoption came up in conversation and it just felt like the right thing for us. We just thought, ‘That’s what we should do.’ We both had good jobs and a nice house. I also worked in the prison service for 25 years before joining Highways England and have experience of working with children displaying difficult behaviour.”

They got in touch with their local social services and began the adoption process. This involved interviews, assessments and home visits. Twelve months later, Debbie and her partner took home their three children. “My partner and I were fairly unique in that we were the first female gay couple to adopt in the Yorkshire area,” she said. “We were taking on three children, which is quite rare, and my two youngest have disabilities as well, so it was quite complicated. Social services were very keen to get the children placed.”



## Mentor and support

Debbie has now become a mentor to support others who are currently going through the assessment process or have recently become adoptive parents and are experiencing difficulties with their children. “It is quite a lengthy and intrusive process to adopt a child, so I support families through that, what happens afterwards and the challenges they might encounter,” she explained. “It involves me giving support, guidance and a listening ear to families.”

She undertook a two-day voluntary training course through a local adoption initiative to become a mentor. She now spends around eight hours every week meeting with families and chatting to them on the phone or via email. Her colleagues have been very supportive, too. “My manager completely supported my desire to do the training,” she said. “It’s great the company offers us volunteering hours, too.”

Part of the volunteering also involves Debbie sharing her experiences about what she has learned from being an adoptive parent. “In the past, children would grow up not knowing that they were adopted but this has now changed, as most children are taken into care when they are two, three or four-years-old,” she

said. “My daughter also suffers from attachment disorder, so we did training in therapeutic parenting (a type of parenting style) to help and support her. It’s only through my experience I’ve learned these things, and this training is something I would encourage adoptive parents to do.”

## The gain outweighs the pain

Debbie would encourage other families to adopt but people must be aware of the challenges, she says. “They need to recognise it’s not a fairy-tale. Not many babies come up for adoption, it’s kids who have been neglected and are suffering from trauma. I’ve not met a single adoptive parent who hasn’t had difficulties and I’ve met hundreds of parents. I feel passionate this is communicated better to potential adoptive parents.

“For me, however, the gain outweighs the pain, as you see the children thriving.”

And what does the family have planned for Christmas? “It will be a relatively quiet affair with close family after a busy holiday to Disney World in Orlando in November.”

## A network for adoptive parents

“I’ve met people in my job who have also adopted children and I feel that we could be of mutual support to each other,” Debbie said. “It’s not something you shout about, but people will come up to me and ask, ‘Are you on that Facebook group for adoptive parents?’ We then end up sitting and talking for hours about our shared experiences. I think it would be great to start up a network for adoptive parents.”

If you are interested in joining a network for adoptive parents, get in touch with Debbie at **Debbie.Blenkarn@highwaysengland.co.uk**.