



Saira and husband Steve Hyde in the garden of their Oxford home with their three-year-old son Zac and their new little treasure, Amara. After a long and emotional journey, the couple finally adopted their daughter – who’s almost six months old – from an orphanage in Pakistan. “She’s a gorgeous, perfect baby,” says her proud dad

'I was trembling with tears streaming as I cradled this tiny bundle'



## 'THE APPRENTICE' STAR SAIRA KHAN TELLS US OF HER LONG AND EMOTIONAL JOURNEY TO ADOPT BABY GIRL AMARA

Greeting us with her two children in the driveway of her beautiful six-bedroom 1930s home in Oxford, Saira Khan couldn't look happier. The feisty woman who was a runner-up in the first series of *The Apprentice* is serene and smiling now. And with good reason: she has reached the end of a hard road to make her family complete.

"Say hello, Zac," she says gently to her three-year-old son, who politely declares: "I'm not Zac, Mumma, I'm Spider Man!" Then, with the biggest of proud Mum smiles, she holds up her new little treasure and declares: "This is our baby girl Amara."

When attempts at a second child through IVF failed last year, Saira, 41, and husband Steve Hyde, 47, knew what they would do. "Family is so important to us that we always said if we couldn't have children we'd adopt. So although I was disappointed, we knew the next step. We wanted Zac to be the older child, but adopting a newborn here is difficult. We thought it unlikely."

### LASTING IMPRESSION

Four years ago, while making a BBC documentary in Pakistan, where her family originates, Saira visited the Edhi Foundation orphanage, which left a lasting impression.

"Belquise Edhi and her husband have run the orphanage for 45 years. I call them living saints. They care for around 60 abandoned children

at a time but as soon as babies arrive they're snapped up for adoption.

"Steve knew about the orphanage and has a great understanding of my culture and heritage. We hoped to be able to balance our mixed-race family with one of the many abandoned baby girls."

So the decision to try to adopt in Pakistan was not difficult. But they still needed official approval in the UK and then Saira would have to spend three months in Pakistan without her young son to complete procedures there.

"Our friends and family thought us brave to adopt but we only saw the chance to give a child a happy, loving home," says Saira. "My brother worried about me taking Zac as the political situation is dangerous. Friends questioned whether we could love the baby as much as our own but of course we can. Everyone was concerned that I'd have to wait for a baby to arrive and wouldn't be able to choose one."

So began the toughest but most rewarding 18 months of their lives. "The day we were approved for adoption in the UK we clung tightly to each other and our social worker Hannah and cried with happiness," says Saira. The approval process delved into every aspect of their lives, with regular three-hour assessments for eight months. There was reading, study, homework – and intense, emotional interviews probing



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their relationship, backgrounds, families and finances. Fifteen months on, having met all the criteria, Saira took the lone journey to Pakistan.

"I was tormented that she was going alone to Karachi but I had to focus on Zac, who repeatedly asked me, 'Where's Mumma?'" Steve says. "I also had to keep my business afloat. For a few weeks I was quite ill with stress."

"I was angry that Steve wasn't with me," Saira says. "Taking responsibility for something that would affect the rest of our lives was a huge demand. I yearned for him and Zac but I knew it wouldn't be practical at that stage."

#### **'IN GOD'S HANDS'**

Saira was also apprehensive about meeting Belquise Edhi. "I'd remembered her being quite matter-of-fact. I had butterflies because she was in control of making our dream come true. I was also concerned she may reject us because Steve is non-Muslim and white. She questioned me in Urdu. I was very nervous. At the end she said, 'You have to wait now, it's in God's hands,' and warned that a newborn may not arrive for two or three weeks."

Equipped with Skype to keep in touch with Steve and Zac, Saira waited nervously at a hotel in Karachi with her friend Khalid, a documentary cameraman. "There are so many misconceptions about adoption and social workers and how long it takes to adopt, that we agreed to do a TV documentary to raise awareness and encourage other couples," she says.

When the foundation phoned sooner than she'd dared hope, Saira grabbed some baby things and shook all the way to the orphanage. She barely had time to call Steve and tell him she was on her way to see a baby girl. "I really needed Steve and wasn't so sure I could go through with this alone. Suddenly I felt the presence of my late father and I felt calm."

"Talking and learning about adoption is one thing but sitting alone in that silent room and having a baby without a name or any history placed in my lap was mind-blowing. I was trembling with tears streaming as



I cradled this tiny bundle. There were so many questions – who were her parents, why did they abandon her, why was she so tiny, did she have health problems? But none could be answered because, like thousands of children every year in Pakistan, she was abandoned. Due to poverty and poor health and education, these babies have a high risk of being born with HIV, hepatitis C and other diseases. Screening is essential but, as I looked at her big brown eyes, I knew she'd be ours forever, whatever issues we had to face." (Happily, Amara – her name is the Sanskrit for "eternal" – was given the all-clear in all her tests.)

Steve had only seen photos of the baby and had mixed emotions. "One minute Saira was saying she was going to see a baby, then she was off to the hospital. I was anxious, but hearing Amara gurgling on the phone was a defining moment for me."

Paperwork meant Saira couldn't return home with Amara for another two months. But in that time Steve and Zac flew out to Pakistan. The family reunion was emotional. Steve was



Little Amara has taken to her brightly decorated Cosatto nursery (above left). Newsreader Kate Silverton was one of the first to meet the new addition (below). When Saira made a video call from Pakistan to tell her friend about the adoption, the BBC anchor lifted her T-shirt to reveal that she was pregnant herself and there were floods of tears all round

tearful and in awe of his new daughter, Zac clung tightly to his “Mumma” – but both clearly adored baby Amara.

#### BRINGING HOME BABY

Eventually the family could bring Amara back to Oxford and introduce her to family and friends. “Our mums stayed for weeks and adore Amara,” says Saira. “Our families, friends and neighbours have been so supportive. [Newly pregnant newsreader] Kate Silverton was first among our friends to come, as was [actress] Laila Rouass.” Nick Hewer, Lord Sugar’s right-hand man on *The Apprentice* and now a close chum, also paid a visit.

Now they’re back home, Zac kisses his new sister and gives her his teddies. “He has not made a fuss at all,” says Saira. “Steve is besotted and calls her ‘Daddy’s girl’.

“Adjusting back home was exhausting. With phones ringing, work demands and now two children, it put a strain on things and I needed Steve to understand. But our social worker talked it through with us and everything is good now. Steve comes home two hours earlier and he is very hands on.

“We can’t imagine our lives without Amara and it is we who are the lucky ones.”

Steve agrees: “Amara is such a great gift we pinch ourselves every morning. She’s a gorgeous, perfect baby.”

What advice would Saira offer to those considering adoption? “You have obstacles and frustration but our social worker was brilliant and if you have a solid relationship with your partner you’ll get through it,” she says. “The process has made us feel more human and in touch with our emotions than ever before.”

For now, with help from an au pair, Saira is back to juggling family with business. As well as being the founder and director of babies’ skincare range Miamoo, she’s working on a new series of *Trade Your Way to the USA* for CBBC.

“This has been a dream come true. It would seem that our family is complete now, but there are so many children in the UK who need loving parents and we have so much love to give that I wouldn’t rule anything out.” **H**

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PHOTOS: MIKE DAINES

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Adopting Abroad: Saira’s Story is in two parts on BBC2 on 6 and 8 September at 9pm.

