



## 'Maybe I'm not so broken after...'

This was a phrase used by one of the young people who shared his story of foster care with us. In the middle of a mundane household task with his foster carer one morning, he suddenly realised this was what he wanted, this was ordinary family life, a safe and secure place to be and that consequently maybe he 'wasn't so broken after all'.

Thirteen people entrusted us with stories of their personal experiences of foster care. Every person experiences life (and foster care) uniquely. These stories reflect the individual circumstances of each young person and foster carer. They reflect their hopes, their fears, their aspirations, the good and the not so good.

Almost one in ten children in Northern Ireland are looked after away from home by foster/kinship foster carers. We continue to need foster carers who can respond to the wide and varied needs of each child in a way which ensures they have the very best chances in life.

I want to thank Emma Edwards who interviewed the young people and their foster carers and compiled these stories. Her sensitive approach and careful handling of the personal reflections of the young people and foster carers was central to making this very important publication possible.

I hope you enjoy reading them. Kathleen Toner, Director,  
The Fostering Network NI

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**I'd like to foster a child myself, because I know how it feels to be that person who doesn't know what's going to happen next. What it's like to have no control.**

# Kathy says that fostering is a mixed bag of highs and lows, but is well worth every moment:

I work full-time and have been fostering for just over seven years. The reason I got into it was because my mother fostered our three cousins and because I only had one daughter and thought it would be good for her, instead of being an only child.

Our first wee one was about 2 ½ when she came to live with us. She came from a very abusive family and the longer she was with us the more came out about what she had experienced. I felt that, in her short life, she had endured more than any of us. Having her was a really good experience, but she was with us for just under three years before she was adopted. She has a little brother and I would have loved to have taken them both, but I didn't have enough bedrooms. I found it hard at the start, because she was so unsettled and she had been so neglected – there was such decay in her teeth, and her skin and general health really needed taken care of. We had to get those things sorted first before you could really focus on helping the child settle. It was very intense.

Of course I worried about the impact on my daughter – I worried that the little one would relay stories about things my daughter would have no idea about - but they bonded so wonderfully. They had a typical sister love/hate relationship, which was just what you want. She was such a part of her family that she has convinced herself that she remembers me bringing her home from the hospital.

When she was adopted, I have to be honest, it broke our hearts. It was like bereavement. My own mother was devastated – you don't realise the effect it has on the whole family who have really welcomed the child. You have to take a couple of months to reflect and realise that, without your help, where would she have been? What would have happened to her if she'd been in a children's home or something like that? We've been so lucky because her adoptive parents are fantastic and let us see her a couple of times a year.

Don't get me wrong, it can be very hard. Children are very often troubled when they come to you, and it's not like having your own child. The support from my local community has been unbelievable – I have a childminder, because I work full-time, and she is so accommodating. The local school is great at organising emergency placements and have helped me out so many times, to the extent of going to the Board to secure an extra place. Everybody in the community has accepted the children as they've come through.

One child we had suffered from foetal alcohol syndrome, which I found very difficult because it was a struggle to get her the support she needed. Everyone you went to, at every meeting you attended, noted it but nothing ever seemed to happen. Just as she was leaving us she actually got a classroom assistant, but it felt like a waste for the child because she had already missed out on so much. She lacked

even basic social skills, and was desperate for friends. She used to say, 'can I get a friend', and you'd explain to her that it wasn't that simple. She just seemed to interact in the wrong way and would do things for attention, like biting people. She thought she was making friends that way.

I do find it challenging that kids are often whipped away before you even get to know them. You signed up to give them a home and give them help, but you've only just got them a doctor and a dentist and a school place and they're taken away from you again. I then have to go to people who've gone out of their way to help this child and tell them, 'thanks, but they've gone now'. It seems like an incredible disruption to their lives, particularly when – in most of the cases I've encountered recently – the ultimate goal seems to be placing them within their wider family. You get to the stage that you feel you're not achieving anything. There must be a way to manage this more efficiently, so that children aren't constantly, and unnecessarily, uprooted. One child, for example, was with her auntie for a week, before being taken to us while the process was gone through, and then back to her auntie. Why was she even lifted in the first place? She was so distressed at being removed from her father, without explanation, that she was just unbelievably sad. Nothing would pacify her – she was just devastated – and she would cry from morning to night. She had to share a room with my daughter and it was just too much, so much so that my daughter moved out to her daddy's. It was too distressing for her, not to mention the fact that she had to get up for school every morning having had no sleep. So often you're focused on the foster child and I don't think I had really thought enough about the impact they can have on my own daughter. On the whole it's been good for her though. My daughter is now studying to do childcare

and wants to go into social work. She's had experiences of people with all different problems and has a lot of empathy, and the minute information comes through the door about fostering she's reading away at it and wanting to attend things. She asks lots of questions about all sorts of things now and we talk in a way we perhaps wouldn't otherwise.

I would love to continue fostering but, with a two bedroom house and a teenage daughter who increasingly needs her own space, it's becoming more challenging. Unfortunately the Housing Executive only counts my own daughter and not the fact that I foster other children, so I'm not eligible for a larger place.

Despite the hurdles it's so rewarding when you hear of the children going on to good placements and a better future. I still I feel I have a lot to give – you can make a huge impact through just the smallest things, like taking them to the beach for a walk or to go crab fishing. For some children the things we take for granted are completely foreign. For example, one wee girl had been with us a month when she asked, 'what is work?' When I spoke to her it seemed not one generation of her family had worked, so she had no concept of where I was going every day. We just assume a level of knowledge that some of them haven't even been gained because no-one has talked to them or helped them to learn the most basic things. Some children don't ask things because they have learned not to expect a response, which is really sad.



**I would say to anyone,  
'you can foster' – nothing  
ventured, nothing  
gained.**



**My daughter is now studying to do childcare and wants to go into social work. She's had experiences of people with all different problems and has a lot of empathy.**

# Marion and her family have been fostering for over 25 years and say that, although it can sometimes be scary, it's always worthwhile

We got involved in fostering because I used to be a childminder and one day a lady from social services came out to do a check, to make sure the place was suitable for children, and she asked had I ever considered it. At first my husband needed a bit of persuading, but we all ultimately agreed that it was something we could do. That was about 26 years ago and although our heart has always been with long-term fostering we've had everything from emergency to respite placements.

It can be very daunting for a child when they first come into your home. People tend to think the children have to come into your home and fit into your lifestyle, but that is harrowing – we need to fit into this child's life because they're coming from God only knows what. It's scary for a child but it's scary for us too, because we don't know who's coming and what problems they have. You just have to be very patient, very caring. You'll know within a week or two if the child is going to settle.

We've had quite a few challenging experiences – sometimes you think you're getting somewhere and then another hurdle appears. We've persevered but sometimes you have to accept that a placement just doesn't work.

It's difficult for men I think. Where I would think nothing of going out and leaving my husband to bath and put our own children to bed, you can't do that with foster children.

You have to be extra careful, because it only takes a misunderstanding to turn everything upside down. At the same time you have to treat them like your own children, and I believe I did a good job rearing ours. I sometimes forget I'm fostering because these kids feel like mine – the proof of the pudding is that they're happy and settled. Of course they're not our children, but while we have the responsibility for caring for them, taking them to everything from medicals to school plays, then they're one big bundle with all our family.

When they move on that is heartbreaking. The first child I had in placement was moved on after five years and I was devastated. It took about six months to get myself ready to face it all over again. We bring these children into our home and our family and it's like losing a loved one. You're advised not to maintain contact after they leave, so that everyone is able to move on with their lives, but it's hard. They do know that I'd never close my door in their face – I'm always here to listen.

Fostering isn't just about bringing a child in and giving them a bed, you're getting a child who has 101 problems – some you don't know until maybe they've been with you six months. It's a worthwhile job that we're doing but it can be very scary and it's not getting any easier.

**I've been so lucky to have long-term placements where we've been able to build a relationship with the children's parents, even attending family events. You want the children to see that we're all working together in their best interests.**

# David\* was looked after by various members of his family from the age of two and went into care at 13:

The day you arrive everything goes over your head. People are talking and welcoming you, but you're in a different world. Your head's all over the place. I was so used to moving about within my family that it wasn't a huge shock - it's just a matter of adjusting.

You're quiet, not yourself. You feel like you're intruding and it takes a while to bond. I fit in here now the very best, but that's only recent and I've been here three years. It's hard suddenly living with people you didn't grow up with.

It took a while even getting used to living in the country and having other children around. It was very, very, busy here – there might have been 10 or 12 people in the living room on any night of the week. It was hard to get used to.

Short term placements aren't the best. It might have taken me two or three years to settle in here, but I knew I had those two or three years – I wasn't going to be moved on at a moment's notice. It actually took me a while to settle down to being with the same people day in, day out, after having moved about so much. I can't say I liked my life, but I was used to it.

It can be very difficult. I know I was hard work, but fostering makes such a difference to someone. When you arrive with a foster family they don't know you, there's no bond, but there's one being made the minute they let you in their home and show you kindness and respect. It's given me an awful lot of confidence to know that I've come through all this. If I didn't have these people I'd have no-one. I am thankful for them, but it took me a while to see it.

I've messed up plenty of times, but I'm on the right path now. I probably wouldn't still be here without them. I was all over the place, but the stability changed things for me completely. I'm doing A-levels when people thought I wouldn't even pass my GCSEs. It's such a difference – it's great. I've got someone at my shoulder helping me and pushing me on.

To anyone who's thinking of fostering, I'd say that you can change a life for the better. I'm going to go on now and get qualifications, when before that wasn't even a possibility.

I'd say this feels like a family, but I have nothing really to compare it to. I half fended for myself and was looked after by so many people that I had no parent model to compare this with. I used to want to say that they were my family, but it felt awkward. Now it just rolls off the tongue. It's a great feeling.



**There's times when I'm standing with my foster mum, changing bedsheets or getting shouted at for not studying, and I think that this must be what it's like to be in a family. It's normal for the first time ever.**

# Justine\* says that while fostering has been a 'success story' for her, she continues to fear judgment by her peers:

At the age of eight I went into foster care. I have a younger sister and an older brother and we all, fortunately, went to the same home. What was initially supposed to be a three week placement turned into 11 years.

I don't know the exact details of why I was in foster care, and I'm not sure I would want to. Sometimes parents aren't responsible enough, or maybe it's just not a good home. Whatever the reason, I'm just happy that my life has turned out well.

Going into foster care initially was scary. You're taken away from what you think is 'normal' and put into someone else's house, and you feel that they're involved in taking your family away from you. You just don't trust anybody.

You kind of want to be as bad and unruly as you can be, because you don't want to know them and you don't want them to know you. You close yourself up because you want to be out of there and you'll do whatever you can to make that happen.

It's only because I was there for so long that I was able to finally open up to my foster family. When we were given the court order to be there long-term I remember kicking and screaming and wailing because I didn't want to be there – I didn't want to be with this family that I didn't know and who had taken us away from our parents. Now I'm glad it did happen, but that's with 11 years of stability behind me. The longer I was there, and the more I grew

to like them and they grew to understand me, I was able to start opening up to them. As time went on I was able to see the opportunities that were available to me that I just didn't have when I was younger. I began to appreciate where I was.

I know that not everyone has a positive experience, particularly when brothers and sisters are split up, which makes me realise how lucky we were. I can't imagine having a relationship with my sister where we just meet up every now and then. When that happens you're truly ripping a family apart.

There was a time when they were going to see if my younger sister could be put up for adoption, but I know that was something my foster family were against – they didn't want us to be split up. I don't know what we would have done if that had happened. It was such an awful time for us, but at least I was going through it with my brother and sister. We weren't alone and we weren't worrying about what was happening to the others in another place. Awful as it was, we were in it together. My sister and I are very close. She has autism and ADHD and I couldn't imagine not being there for her. If you're not seeing them as much it would be difficult to keep that close bond.

I see my mum every month. When I was under 18 it was supervised by a social worker, but now I see her independently. I know she wants me to come and spend time with her at home,

but I'm not sure it's a door I'm ready to open just yet. I haven't been there in 11 years and it would bring back a lot of memories.

My foster parents and my mother are two completely different types of people. My foster parents have never tried to replace my mum – they've always said 'we're here for you and we love you' but at the same time your mummy is your mummy. There is a divided loyalty, but I try not to see it as a competition and I love them equally.

My foster brothers and sisters are there for me just as my foster parents are. They're great and I feel like they're full brothers and sisters to me. Maybe we're not blood family, but I feel like we may as well be.

I definitely think I owe my success to having that stability, those people I can turn to. My mother recently said to me, 'I'm so glad you went into foster care, because I couldn't provide you with the opportunities you have now'. That made me so angry, because I felt like 'why couldn't you? Why did I have to go to a strange family to get what every child deserves?'

I do think foster care has been a real success story for me. Through the support I've been given I have the drive to succeed. My foster parents have shaped me from what I was and enabled me to grow and mature. Now I'm at university and am increasingly independent and that's due in no small part to their love and support.

They encourage me and value my achievements. I feel that so much of what I have been able to achieve is down to how they raised me. When I came to them at eight I didn't know basic manners or have respect for other people, but they explained to me and taught me values and behaviours that I still carry with me to this day.

Despite how well I feel I'm doing, I can still never let anyone know that I'm fostered – not even my closest friends. I keep it a secret because I don't want people to judge me. I feel that people will think that I was in care because I did something wrong. I remember at school my brother told people on the school bus and, because I'd kept it so secret, it spread like wildfire. People starting coming up to me asking what I had done to be removed from my family. The fact is that, as a child in foster care, you can immediately be labelled as destructive and troubled. Some foster children do struggle to settle, particularly if they've been in multiple homes – but how could they trust and feel secure when they have no control over where they'll be moved next? When there's no stability why would you open up to people who probably won't be in your life for long? I've had so many social workers that I stopped engaging with them, because why build a relationship when they're going to move on and you have to start all over again with someone new?

It's very hard for children in foster care – they have no stable support system, so of course they can have difficulties. But it always falls back on the child, as though it's their fault. They're supposed to be grateful and thankful for being given a home, but it's very hard when they don't know how long they're going to be there and, in truth, never wanted to be taken away from their mummy and daddy in the first place.

I find it really painful that foster children are judged so harshly. Even my foster parents lost friends because people didn't understand why they wanted us – they felt we'd be destructive and a nuisance and they were desperate to know what we had done to be put into care.

They encourage me and value my achievements, I feel that so much of what I have been able to achieve is down to how they raised me.

Love

Confidence  
Appreciation

Goals  
HAPPINESS  
Encouraging  
Bonding

Effort

LISTENING

Best interests

Possibility

Loyalty

HOPE

Empathy

Friends

Helping

More for me

Success

Trust

Positive experience

Relationships

Vision

Making friends

Worthwhile

Working together

Achievement



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**STABILITY**

*opportunities*

**POSITIVE  
EXPERIENCE**

*Education*

**Memories**

**HAPPY**

**LOVE**

**success**

# Foster carer Rachel says the rewards you get from fostering are 'priceless':

My family fostered when I was a little girl and, to be honest, I can't really remember a time in my life when we didn't have children around. I grew up with the feeling that, yes, I could have my own kids, or I could do something to help the many already out there who need a home.

I've worked with children a lot throughout my career, and they're so much a part of my life that, once I was settled, I felt that I could really do this - I could take a child into my home.

I'm a single carer, on my own most of the time, but I definitely need support. I have amazing friends and a wonderful community around me, who fully embrace what I do, and are there to help when you have a child you can't let out of your sight for a moment. The local children knock on the door to see who I have staying with me, and if they want to come out and play. They're wonderfully welcoming, and the children are made to feel important.

As a respite foster carer, I plot out the time I have available to take children - usually one to two weekends a month - and the social work teams plan round that. You're matched with a child who suits your lifestyle, interests and way of life, so I spend a lot of time out the back of my house, ploughing round on a go-kart!

I want children to come to me and have a new experience, so there's no sitting in front of the TV. What we tend to do is baking or art, going to the beach or for a walk - taking off on adventures. I don't do anything complicated or flash, but the enjoyment of having a picnic in the car, and watching a child running for the first

time in their lives on a beach in the pouring rain, screaming with delight, is priceless.

Of course it's tiring - every parent knows that it takes energy and motivation, but the desire to make a difference to a child's life really does carry you through.

People think it costs a lot to entertain a child, but it really doesn't. The amount of toys I have just from sending emails round our friends and colleagues asking for anything they don't need is phenomenal. The biggest thing these children need is attention and time. The things most of us took for granted - that someone would get up and make you breakfast, or play with you - means so much to them. One little boy sat for a whole morning just playing with toy cars. He didn't have that time and space at home to just be a little boy, and play without having it trashed.



**When you're struggling through the process of becoming a foster carer, you can lose sight of why you're doing it. But as soon as you have a child in your care you remember. Even when I feel frustrated with the system now - which does happen - there are so many moments that keep you on track. Like when you read a child their first ever bedtime story you think, yeah, this is what it's all about. It's amazing, and you know you're making a difference.**

# For Sammy Jo, being fostered from the age of two gave her the opportunity of a better life and she says she 'wouldn't have it any other way':

I came to my foster family when I was three, so I don't remember a thing about what it was like leaving my parents or settling in here. I now know that my mum was an alcoholic and Daddy had anger issues, and that Mummy had set the house on fire – which was one of the main reasons why we were taken into care. There were five of us and we were put into different foster homes; the three girls in one place and the two boys in another.

I see my daddy now but my mum passed away a few years ago. My eldest sister moved back in with Daddy when she was 11 – the three of us had the option but me and my other sister chose not to. There was no bad reason for us not wanting to, I was just happy here and had a relationship here. I didn't see my mum so my foster mum was 'Mummy' to me, although I've never called her that – probably because my older sisters never did.

It went on for about a year where Daddy kept trying to get us home with him, but then he realised that we were settled and happy and we should stay wherever we wanted to. I was seven or eight at that time and I remember having to meet with our Guardian ad Litem so she could see we weren't being pushed either way by anyone, and our reasons for our decision. We used to stay with my daddy at the weekends and it got to the stage that I'd want them to phone him and say I was sick and couldn't go down because I didn't want to hurt him. His new wife had four kids and they were

excited to have us all together and you were afraid to say what you really wanted because he thought he'd done something wrong. The fact was my foster parents were my mummy and daddy as well as him – it was like having three parents. We were contented here and had friends, so moving back home would have meant leaving everything. We felt we had the best of both worlds this way, not to mention two Christmases and two birthdays – who would say no to that!

My mum went on to have more kids and they were adopted– they're teenagers now and my sisters and brothers are keen to contact them. I think that some things are better left in the past. They hopefully are very happy in their families and may not even know that they're adopted.

In primary school I didn't tell people I was fostered, because most kids wouldn't have understood what I was talking about. In secondary school they seemed to use being fostered as a reason if I didn't do well. To me being fostered has never meant anything. The way I look at it is that if we weren't put into care, God knows what would have happened. I might not have been here, I could have six kids or be hooked on drugs. There was no stability. I was given an opportunity for a better life, I was pushed to go to school and given stability and a routine, and that would never have happened. Here you go to school unless your head's hanging off!

**Foster parents are doing what your own parents can't do for you, but I know it's hard for kids to understand. My foster mum and dad have always been my mum and dad, just as much as my own dad, and I wouldn't have it any other way.**

# Tracey\*, now aged 18, says being fostered set her on a better course in life and gave her the family support she had never previously experienced...

I started off in kinship care because my mum is an alcoholic and was abusive. When I was 11 my auntie said she would take us for a month, maybe two months, so me and my sister and two wee brothers went to stay with her while mum went into treatment. I didn't really know my auntie before we moved in with her – none of us really did - I'd seen her maybe once a year before that.

My mum actually did get off the drink for six weeks, but it didn't last – as soon as she was back in her own house she was back on it again. So we ended up staying with my auntie for four years, at which point that placement broke down for me.

I went into an emergency foster placement at that time, but where I was meant I had to travel 40 minutes to and from school every day. I really didn't like it, not because of the carers, but because it was in the countryside and I wasn't near anyone I knew.

For two months I was in another placement while they tried to fix the relationship with my auntie but, to be honest, there was just no chance I could go back there. At that point I was moved to a permanent foster placement, and I've been here since – nearly three years.

I only get to see one of my brothers once a month, which is really sad, but I see my older sister whenever I want because she's over 18. The whole situation has meant that I'm separate from all of my family, and I don't really get to see them, and that seems unfair.

The kinship placement was actually much harder for me than being fostered generally. I never felt I could fully come out of myself. I was living there four years and still felt I had to ask permission to get a glass of water – I felt like a visitor.

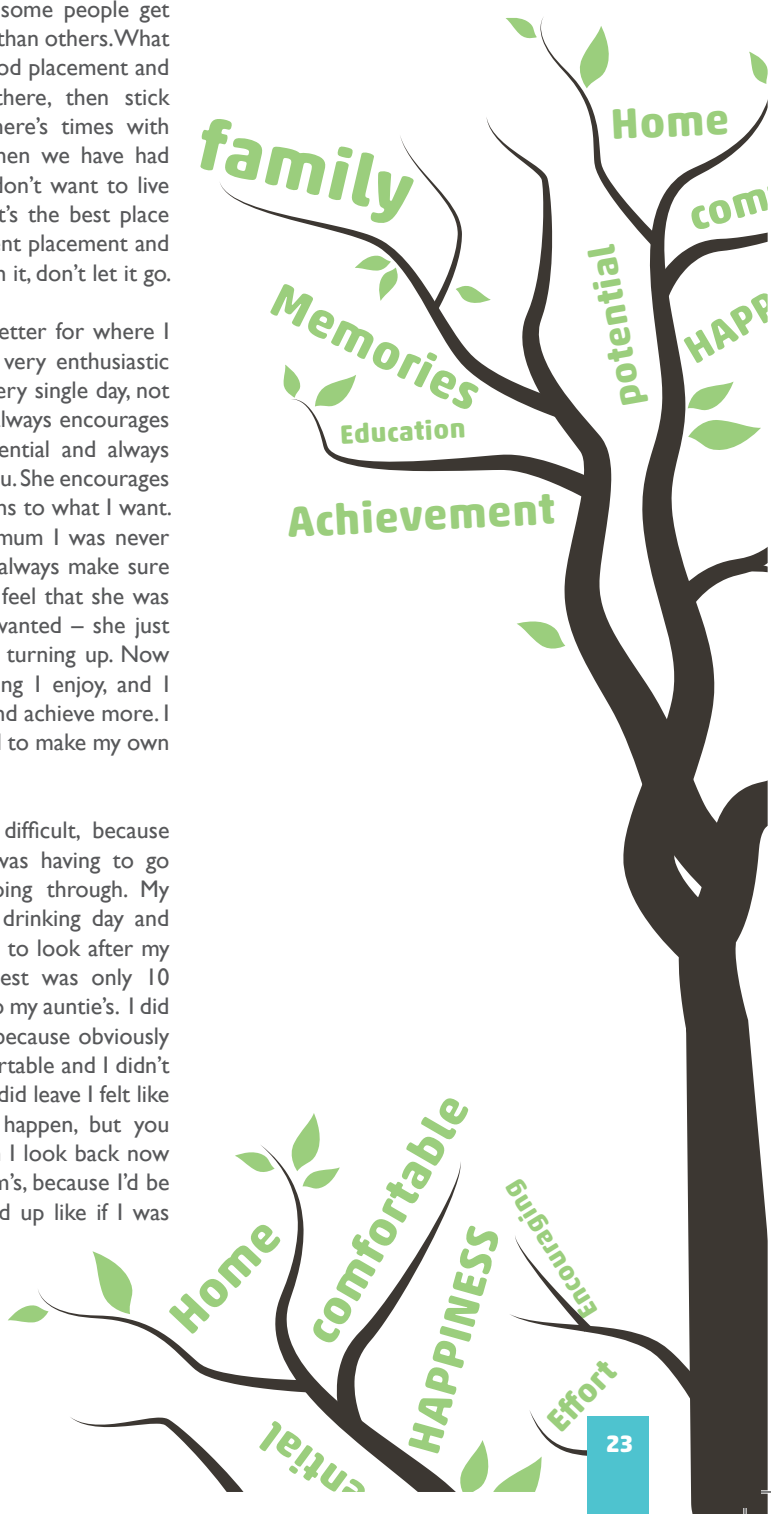
Coming to a new foster placement was really awkward at the start, but I was able to settle in here far quicker than I ever did at my auntie's house. To be honest I feel more a part of this family than I ever did their family.

You have mixed feelings when you arrive with a new foster family – you feel really awkward coming into someone's house and you're scared about what they'll be like. I was able to meet my foster mum before I moved and whenever I met her she was doing up a bedroom for me, so that made me feel good. The first while was difficult though, I sat up in my room most of the time because I didn't know what to talk about, or know them well enough to just chat. But I started to settle in and it just got better from there. They made me feel like part of their home.

Everybody is different, and some people get used to a new place quicker than others. What I would say is that if it's a good placement and deep-down you're happy there, then stick with it, because I know there's times with me and my foster mum when we have had arguments and I've said 'I don't want to live here anymore', but in fact it's the best place for me. If you get a permanent placement and you feel really comfortable in it, don't let it go.

Definitely things are a lot better for where I am now. My foster mum is very enthusiastic about education - I'm in every single day, not allowed to miss a day. She always encourages you to reach your full potential and always tries to get the best out of you. She encourages me to work and always listens to what I want. Whenever I lived with my mum I was never at school. My auntie would always make sure I was at school, but I didn't feel that she was really interested in what I wanted - she just wanted to make sure I was turning up. Now I'm finally studying something I enjoy, and I want to push myself to do and achieve more. I feel that I'm being supported to make my own decisions.

Living with my mum was difficult, because I knew that nobody else was having to go through what we were going through. My mum is a full-on alcoholic, drinking day and night, so my sister and I had to look after my little brothers - the youngest was only 10 months old when we went to my auntie's. I did like living with my mummy, because obviously that was where I was comfortable and I didn't want to leave her. When we did leave I felt like nothing worse could ever happen, but you kind of get used to it. When I look back now I'm glad that we left my mum's, because I'd be worried what I'd have ended up like if I was still there.



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**Love**

24

**Confidence**  
Appreciation

Goals

**NESS**

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# Seventeen year old Chris\* was placed with his permanent foster family 14 years ago, and says he is looking forward to a bright future, thanks to their love and support:

I've always hated ambiguity, so when I arrived here – at three years of age - my first question was 'what can I call you?' It's been 'mum and dad' from then, and it always will be.

I have more bonds here than I do with my birth family. I continue to have contact with my real mother, but – as much as I love her – hers is not a life I want to lead. I have ambition and pride in myself now, and I want more than she does out of life.

Everybody in schools has the same opportunity, what's different is the support you get at home. I worked hard and had an incentive – I didn't want to end up like my birth family. I want to get a good job – I don't want to be leeching off the system.

This is my home. This is where I'll bring my children to see their grandparents; where I'll introduce my fiancé; these are the people who will be introduced as my mum and dad at my wedding.

You'll never know if a placement is right unless you stay for a while. It takes time to develop bonds with a new family, especially for a foster child where previous bonds have been broken. That takes time to heal. You don't usually let anyone in and I used to come out fighting, but if you have the courage to bring down your defences then your new family will do everything they can to help you.

I'm no saint – I've done some not great things, but I've learned from them. I was emotionally traumatised when I arrived here. I had a lot of problems, and my mum had to give up work to give me the level of attention I needed. I was very destructive, it was always someone else's fault and I used to wet the bed constantly. I was just troubled. It took me a long time to come to terms with my problems, and even today things come to the surface.

In my peer group I'm the one people come to with their problems, because I've had them all. I recognise the walls people build up – I've used them too – and I can see the pain they're in.

I really commend foster carers for effectively welcoming strangers into their home. Although I didn't appreciate it then, I certainly appreciate it now. Someone needed to fill the void, and they did. If there's even a tiny chance that you could bring light into a child's eyes by giving them a home, shelter, company, love, then I think that's amazing. Anyone can do that, you just have to want to.

I remember very clear the day at primary school when I stood in front of the class and told absolutely everybody that I was fostered. It felt like a weight off, and my family took me out and we celebrated like it was a big event.

I'm thankful now that I'm fostered. My mum and dad have always stood behind me, pointing me in the right direction, and pushing me forward. Soon I'll be leaving for university, but I'll always come home to them – because they're my family.



# 17 year old Andrea\* says being fostered by her grandparents was 'life-changing':

I have been living with my granny and granda since I was two days old, because my mummy wasn't well enough to look after me and my big sister. I enjoy living with granny and granda because they take care of me and buy me anything I ever need or want. My younger sister came here when she was seven months old, and my brother came when he was five months old. They both love living here too.

I am very happy with both my grandparents. They are very special to me, and I love them very much. I will always remember what they did for me and my siblings - giving up so much for my family, even their jobs, to take care of us. I don't have much contact with my mother - the last time I saw her she was drinking and didn't look very well. If I see her we get on grand. We're close in our own way, but I wouldn't want to go back. I always worry about my mummy, but I wouldn't give up my grandparents to go and live with her.

Granny and Granda foster lots of children, as well as us. When they arrive we always make an effort to sit down and talk with them and try to be friends as fast as we can, so they feel comfortable and like part of us. It never gets lonely here - there's always somebody to chat to. I like it when other children share my home, and when they leave I miss them very much. Some of them are particularly special to me, and I will always hold them close in my heart. We've had a new little girl with us for just a couple of months and we all love her. It's very sad when they leave, especially because they never want to - everyone loves being here.

I get on brilliantly with my social workers and everyone at Fostering Network- they're so good to me and I see them loads. They help us get anything we need, and generally support us. I am getting driving and theory lessons because of them, just like my sister did - which meant she could get the job she's in - and I am so happy. Granda is getting me a wee car if I pass my driving test. I want to work with children, which is no surprise coming from this family!

It doesn't bother me that people know I'm fostered. I have a friend who's in the same position, and it's just what we're used to. I love it here, and fostering is definitely something I would try myself. My granny and granda don't believe in splitting up families, they always wanted us all to be together, and I'm so grateful for that. Fostering is brilliant for children, and I'd say to anyone thinking about it to just do it. It's meant everything to us. Without my granny and granda we'd probably have been split up, maybe moved around, and wouldn't have been able to see each other. That's just too awful to think about.



**Fostering is brilliant for children and I'd say to anyone thinking about it to just do it. It's meant everything to us.**

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Best

**SAFE**

Working tog

Love

edence

# Michael\* says that being care experienced has made him grow up quickly, but is only a small part of his identity

When I was nine there was trouble at home and my mum and dad split up. My mum was depressed and my dad was living with his new girlfriend. Originally my brother and sister were living with my mum and I was with my dad, but – from what I remember – I was told I was going to spend a night at my mum's, and that night turned into just under a year.

It plummeted downhill from there. There was alcohol abuse and I'm pretty sure drugs too. I was basically left looking after my little sister and baby brother, which no nine year old should have to do. My mum also had a new partner and there was domestic abuse – I remember her collecting me from school with this massive shiner of a black eye and taking us to a Women's Aid shelter. After two nights there my sister was admitted to hospital, for some reason, and my brother and I were put into separate foster placements.

I was taken away from my mum at night and I remember being really scared and confused about what was happening, but the placement itself was lovely. I was there for two weeks, but I always knew that I was going to be sent here as soon as my foster family was able to take me.

The minute I came here I felt like, 'this is it, I'm going to be grand'. I jumped in head first. I recently had a conversation about this with my foster mum and she said that from the day and hour I arrived I never said I wanted to be anywhere else.

From then the education and support I've received is better than anything I could have hoped for with my mum.

I have the most turbulent relationship with my mum. She does things like trying to increase contact without seeing how we feel about it, but in other respects we get along well. She tells me she's doing well now and living in a better place, but I don't feel I'm ready to take the step of going to see her at her home. I'll do it when I'm ready, if I'm ready.

I've heard stories of people who really don't get on with their foster parents, and I've stayed there on respite and found them absolutely lovely – the polar opposite experience. I don't know if it's different personalities, or the fact that we come to foster care bringing our own past baggage and put up barriers.

If you're going into foster care it's for a good reason – it's for your own protection and your own safety. You do get a lot from your foster family, very often more than you could ever have hoped for where you came from. There's a good reason I'm not at home with my mum.

Being fostered is a tiny part of my identity. Good friends know I've been in foster care, but not more widely than that. There definitely is a stigma, even when I hear them teaching about fostering and adoption in school I'm amazed at the ignorance. There is a sense that you've done something to be there, when in fact it's something out of your control and absolutely not your responsibility.



**The education and support I've received is better than anything I could have hoped for with my mum.**

**Opportunity**  
**Bonds**  
**Encouraging**  
**lucky**



**You do get a lot from your foster family, very often more than you could ever have hoped for.**

**Grand**

Education

Pride

Opport

lucky

Positive  
Outlook

support

Protection

# Eighteen year old Jonny says being fostered made him feel like he was no longer in the care system, but part of a family:

I've been in care the majority of my life – since I was five or six. It began as respite, but led into an emergency placement one weekend when I was seven. That was traumatic. I had to go into school on the Monday and my overwhelming memory is of being terrified because I didn't have my uniform. After that I was moved into a residential unit, which wasn't the best environment to be in. I was there for a year and half, with respite breaks, when I was moved here permanently.

Mum and dad did as much as they could to make it an easy transition. The best thing was moving primary schools, where I could just start afresh and tell everyone straight away that I was in foster care, instead of hiding it like I had been doing. To this day I'm very open about the fact that I'm in care, and what that means. People have fewer questions that way, and my friends are very protective.

Being in care is a lot different to any other childhood. That's why foster care is so good – it is the closest thing you can have to a real family. I wanted the things normal children have as quickly as possible; I didn't want all the medicals children in care get, didn't want social workers deciding when I got my hair cut or if I could go on a school trip. It was a matter of having as close to a family life as possible.

I wouldn't be anywhere near where I am today if it wasn't for the opportunities being here has given me. I call mum and dad 'mum and dad' because that's what they are. They integrated me into their family – not just them but literally every member of the wider circle.

They immediately made me feel like a son, brother, nephew, grandson. It's been a major influence on my life.

My birth parents obviously loved me, but clearly weren't able to show it, and I want to go on and do better by my own children. It's a major issue for children in care. They may be very grateful to their foster carers, but it's difficult to show it because they've been let down so many times, and it's hard to drop the barriers.

Being in care and having the 'good luck' to be taken in by my parents wasn't normal and I wonder how all that affects your development. It's hard to know if my traits are those of a child in care, or just a child. I'd like to know if I'm not as broken as I've sometimes felt.

Having your own children isn't easy, but taking on children who've had a difficult past – and not the best of starts – is very hard. I don't know that I'd have stuck with me the way that they have. Like my mum says to me, it's the little victories that make it all worthwhile.

None of my friends have ever come close to having the same experiences as me or having to deal with the things I've dealt with this early in my life and I'm really glad they haven't had to. My past has definitely influenced how I relate to them. For example I sometimes forget that not doing your homework is a huge deal to some people. I know how to deal with big things like bereavement – when to give someone space and what to say – stressing over schoolwork seems like small stuff to me.

**I'm very, very fortunate to be where I am. I have the opportunity, if I work hard, to go and be whatever I want to be. To me, long term foster care - a family situation - gives you the best opportunity for a decent future.**

**Love**

**Confidence**

Appreciation

Goals

**BUSINESS**

Encouraging

ding

**LISTENING**

**Best Interests**

Possibility

# University student Paul\* says that life with his mum feels like an 'alternate universe', compared with his experience in foster care

It all kicked off when I was around P5 or P6, but I was young so I don't know the 'ins and outs' of why we were taken away from home. My sister was with me the whole time - I didn't realise that families would ever be split up, and I couldn't get over that. When I heard it was a possibility I was astounded.

We were first placed with cousins and it was familiar but you definitely didn't feel like part of the family. When we then moved into a temporary foster placement it was definitely scary. We were there for two years and we were happy and grew attached, which made it hard to leave again, but they prepared us for the move for a long time. I wasn't looking forward to it, but you get used to the idea that it's temporary. Before our long-term placement was settled we went round a couple of different places and were introduced to the families. I remember one place had about seven children running about, going crazy. I was totally overwhelmed and intimidated. Where we settled long-term the children were kind of shy and I thought, 'that's alright, I can relate to that'. Because it was permanent it started to feel like a real family – a fresh start I suppose. The children were the same age as us, so we fitted in straight away.

I see my mum whenever it suits now, but I still live with my foster family. Thinking about still being with my mum is like an alternate universe and I can't even imagine what life would have been like. I have a life where I live now and I would never really consider moving back in with my mum – that would feel like a step back.

I remember when I was at primary school, and still living with my mum, that I came home from school and didn't do homework or anything. It didn't matter what grades I got – it wasn't really an issue. Whenever I was in foster care it suddenly was an issue. I remember, not being great at maths, that one time I got a B and the teacher was going on that it was great and I thought, 'class, I actually did well'. I'd never really tried before and hadn't been encouraged to put effort in.

I never had the whole experience of being moved about, and I think that's important. Long term placement is the key, and after that you really have to make an effort yourself. Try and get embedded in the community – join a youth club or a sports club. If your school is a distance away from your placement you can be kind of detached from both places, and that's a really hard way to live. I made the choice to move to a local school and I think that helped, because I knew more people from the area and could start to build a life for myself. You need to commit to it and not be afraid to invest emotionally.

If you're in a long-term placement you probably need to convince yourself that, in reality, it's unlikely you'll go back to your parents. It's a hard thing to do, but if you can come to terms with that it helps. My aunts would tell me that we wouldn't ever go back to my mum, so that helped me to move on. I didn't hold on to that hope as much as maybe other people.

**Because it was  
permanent it started to  
feel like a real family-  
a fresh start I suppose.**

**Love**

**Confidence**

Appreciation

**“Reach for the top of the tree and you get to the first branch. But reach for the stars and you get to the top of the tree.”**

**(Lemn Sissay MBE)**



# The Fostering Network

**EVERY CHILD • EVERY CARER • EVERY DAY**

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people. Transforming children's lives is at the heart of everything we do.

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