

Fostering story: – Long term care

With our daughter approaching four years old, we started looking into fostering in 2013. Along with the obvious altruistic reasons, we felt that fostering would give our daughter some life experiences to give her a well-rounded view of the world and the needs of others. We applied to be short term carers, to take on emergency placements and planned short term assignments. It was made clear to us that 'short term' could be any length of time, depending on the needs of the child.

The application process was detailed but simple enough – an assessor looked into our backgrounds, our reasons for fostering, our financial stability, support network, etc. As long as you are open and honest, it's a fairly smooth process. After a lot of paperwork and a panel interview (more pleasant than intimidating), we became approved foster carers for up to two children, and started getting the phone calls regarding children who needed help.

Our first experience was a long weekend with two lovely girls whose mum was down on her luck and just needed a few days to find somewhere to live. While Social Services assisted her, we gave the kids a fun activity-filled weekend. As our first placement, receiving a phone call from the mum thanking us profusely for looking after her kids so well was a great emotional boost. For the following year we had a number of placements, lasting between one day and 7 weeks, and we've seen a wide variety of reasons why kids come into care. Some children are more challenging than others, but both children and carers get support from Social Workers to make the placement a success.

Foster caring has fit in with our family life. Some placements have been complicated in getting kids to school at a distance from our normal routine, but Social Services do attempt to match children to individual carers' circumstances. They have also carefully matched in consideration to the age and safety of our daughter, and we are able to say no if they suggest a match that we feel would not work.

Three years ago, we took in a lad who came from very difficult circumstances. He came to us following an emergency removal from his home, and it soon became clear that he would never be returning home. 18 months later he was still with us, at which time a court decision was made to look for long term foster care for him. So we were asked the inevitable question – would we consider taking him until he turns 18. And against all our original intentions, we decided to take him on permanently. He has fit well into our family, and helping him to progress from a frightened, angry child into a happy and bright young man has been immensely rewarding. He still has some emotional issues, but he is getting all the help that he needs; Social Services and his school are very supportive. He's doing so well that he won the top award for his progress at the annual Foster Care Awards, presented to him by the Mayor of Bedford. A couple of months later, he nominated our daughter for the Children Who Share award, writing that "she's only little, but she cares". She won the award, and seeing him crying with happiness as she collected her award will live in my memory forever.

We now consider ourselves a family of four.