

Fostering: Meet the Foster Carers

Hampshire foster carers share their experiences of fostering, offering a flavour of what is involved in fostering and how they feel about their task ...

Meet Alison

Alison, from Havant, always wanted to foster but thought you had to be married with your own home to do so. However, she sent off for information during fostering fortnight and soon found that being single and in rented accommodation was no barrier. She's been fostering for the past three years taking children from the age of 2 up to 15. Friends and family are supportive and while she entered her first stage of training with some trepidation she was absolutely elated to have been selected.

"Fostering has made me feel like a complete person. I had been a financial consultant and a company secretary but I felt there was something missing in my life. Fostering has completely filled that hole and I wouldn't change what I do now for the world even if I was offered a million pounds!

"When I see smiling faces and enthusiasm that is all I need. I love the fact that the children

love and trust me enough to tell me their worst fears and dreads and yet want to celebrate when they achieve. No career I ever had comes close to the fulfilment I get from fostering. I am very proud of the children I have had. "The important thing is to listen to the children and make them realise how important they are to you and as members of society. Building their self esteem is of paramount importance."

But how did it feel when Alison received her first child into her care? "Family Placement social workers have been helpful, professional and totally supportive." Z was 10 and came fortnightly for a short break. At first I was terrified – I'd done all the training but here was a real human being! She needn't have worried since taking Z in she has fostered 14 children on short-term placements. Currently living with Alison and about to be linked with her more formally is a young boy aged 12. "He is keen on school, kickboxing and sailing. He loves the opportunities he has as a looked after child! Another young boy has also come into my care and they are both amazing boys!

Fostering Fortnight was like turning on a light for me and I now feel I'm really living my dream."

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Meet Emma and Richard

Emma's parents fostered a little boy while she was a child. "It wasn't for long but it made an impact on me," said Emma. "We planned to look at it when our children were teenagers but when our daughter was about a year old we decided we had the time, attention and love to give so would apply. Also I always wanted to be a stay-at-home Mum to my children, but I needed something more and fostering has given me that. I certainly don't get bored at home anymore!"

The couple, from Southampton, are approved for placements of children and young people from 0-18 and can also take parent and baby placements with a view to helping young inexperienced mums learn how to cope as parents.

"Our daughters are growing up sharing us, and often the foster placement and associated social workers meetings can take up a lot of our time, but they are great about it and we are proud of them for that.



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Emma & Richard cont

They have learnt that not all children are as fortunate as they are and we hope they will grow up knowing that it is everyone's responsibility to help care for those who are in need".

"It is difficult sometimes ... I would just urge more people to do it. It is hard work but extremely worth it. There are so many people out there who have the time and love to give to a child in need, but don't even consider it. Yes, it's hard work, but it's also very worthwhile and satisfying."

Meet Jenny

Some people thought Jenny, from Holbury, wouldn't be able to adapt to having a child in the house as she and her partner Duncan didn't have any children of their own but they couldn't have been more wrong.

"Five years on we are still here fostering and loving the challenges," said Jenny. "We have long term sibling placements since March 05. They are fabulous kids with hopefully a bright future. They are part of our wider family now. The eldest says she will be with us until she is 80!

"We have a pretty normal routine for the most part, both kids attend school daily, after school clubs etc so the weekend we tend to chill out or partake in some activity or other. The youngest has a lot of medical issues, so life can be very tough for him and hectic for us. We try to normalise his medical condition as much as possible so he can enjoy a full and varied life.

"We feel privileged, knowing we might touch a child's life to promote better outcomes for them, giving them choices and allow them to see what a loving and supportive life can help them achieve. The rewards are seeing a child grow that otherwise would/could have ended up as a statistic and not fulfilling their potential. I enjoy being able to take care and be responsible for lives rather than sitting in front of the computer in an office not fulfilling my giving back potential.

"Every day is a challenge. I have been very fortunate to work with some "make it happen" kinds of people, so things haven't been particularly difficult for me. I have a great professional support network.

"Fostering is not for everyone, if I had £1 for every time someone said "How do you foster?" I'd be a millionaire. It is life changing but I'd never change what I'm doing. I really feel I'm making a difference in a small way in this huge world."

Meet Julian and Jill

Julian and Jill, from Emsworth, have been fostering for 37 years and their introduction to it sounds dramatic but it shows the need for foster carers to be flexible and prepared for anything.

"The phone call came quite late at night. Six children had arrived on the Metropolitan line with their mother who had taken them from their dad in the north of England and just travelled as far as they could go. They had nowhere to stay, police and social services became involved.

The children went to 3 different foster homes. We had 3 beautiful little girls. They stayed with us 3 months, then dad came in a minibus and collected all of them and took them home. We were really pleased to help, as we had a big house it wasn't too difficult, said Jill."

More recently the couple had a baby: "We have just had a baby with special needs for 5 months. He has now moved to live with his dad and grandparents. He was the most gorgeous little baby and we all really loved him. We had the normal baby routine, interspersed with many hospital, health visitor, physio and occupational therapy appointments. He also had quite severe infantile eczema so he had to be creamed and wet wrapped. His family brought him to see us last week and he looked fantastic!

"The most rewarding thing about being a foster carer is being there when someone really needs help. The rewards are when the placement is happy and has a successful outcome, either by return to family or on to a long term appropriate foster family or stays with you. If you have a child who responds well to you the rewards are great; seeing them blossom and to get on well at school and with their peers."

But fostering is not without its challenges said Jill: "Some teenagers are streetwise and wary of you. If it works however, and you have a good relationship the rewards are immeasurable. Family contact can be difficult but good support from those around you including professionals is vital.