

'It's incredibly rewarding'

We talk to three foster carers about their experiences of looking after children who are unable to live with their own families



'I'M LOVING EVERY MINUTE'

Astra Williams, 51, lives in Catford and fosters a 12-year-old girl

'I've been a foster carer for about a year. I've wanted to do it for ages, ever since I saw a programme on TV about kids who need a good home. I thought I could offer help and support and provide a loving environment. When my daughter left home two years ago there was a gap in my life, so I applied to become a foster carer. I found the training very useful and we are very well supported by social workers and their supervisors.'

'Because I work from 9 till 4 every day as a project housing manager, I specified that I wanted to foster 11-year-olds and upwards. One of my first foster children was a 15-year-old girl who kept running away. After five weeks she went to a foster home outside of London. She still keeps in touch with me and sends me messages, which I'm pleased about as it shows I made an impression and gained her trust.'

'It's going very well with my

12-year-old foster daughter. We go shopping, to the cinema – it's a lovely experience. I'm loving every minute. I give her space to talk about whatever she wants. She is part of my family. I'm building up trust with her so that she feels comfortable.'

'I'll carry on fostering as long as I can. I'd recommend it to anyone who has a spare room.'



'I'VE FOSTERED MORE THAN 100 CHILDREN'

Kathy Worwood, 61, lives in Brockley and has been a foster carer for 26 years

'I became a foster carer in 1983. My first son was three and I became pregnant with my second son during the assessment, and I saw fostering as a job that would allow me to stay at home. I specified teenagers as I didn't want my sons to feel pushed out – the needs of a teenager are very different to those of a toddler.'

'I had some experience with teenagers as I'd worked as a matron in a boys school. My first placement was a 14-year-old girl, and from then on I tended to stay with girls although later I did take a few boys. I've probably fostered more than 100 children over the years but I remember every single one. Sometimes they call or visit me out of the blue.'

'In 1991 I took on two 10-year-old girls and they stayed with me until they were ready to leave home. One's now 28, married with two children and expecting her third, the other is 27 and was bridesmaid at my eldest son's wedding. They are part of our family. When my husband was ill with cancer they were a

huge support. And the last thing we did as a family before my husband died in 2004 was attend my foster daughter's wedding.'

'My two sons have benefitted from living with foster children. They feel a lot of empathy with women because of having teenage girls around them. I don't do long-term fostering any more and I'm winding down now because of my age. At present I have my 20-year-old Vietnamese foster daughter with me – she's been with me since she was 14 and is now at university.'

'I would highly recommend fostering. It's given me a career, allowing me to use my skills with people and be an old-fashioned mum at the same time. Fostering is a bit like being a professional parent. It's terrific knowing that you've made a change in someone's life. When you know you've made a connection with a kid, it's incredibly rewarding. Children in care are all individuals and, although it can be difficult to mend their lives, foster carers really can make a difference by offering them a home and security.'



'WE TRY TO MAKE LIFE AS NORMAL AS POSSIBLE'

Kelly Newton, 38, lives in West Wickham with her husband, two sons aged seven and nine, and three foster children

'My husband and I have been foster carers for Lewisham Council for four years. I'm at home full time and my husband works in IT, but he has flexible hours so he can often help out with the children before school. We're short-term foster carers, which means we can be asked to look after children for anything from a couple of days to a few years.'

'The approval process took about 18 months and involved a social worker visiting us about six times to discuss our background, our parenting experiences, our family. She then wrote up a report, which was sent to a panel for approval. We also had to have medicals and be CRB checked. Once we were approved, we went on a three-day training course.'

'Currently I foster two brothers aged seven and four and a girl aged 20 months.'

Previously I fostered a baby for about five months, and a boy for two years, who was eventually adopted by his aunt. It was very hard saying goodbye to him, but it's comforting for us to know that we've given him a good start.'

'Some of the children's stories are very sad but I try not to dwell on it. We try to make life as normal as possible for the children and show them how good life can be. All the children I've fostered have had some supervised contact with their birth parents, either at our home or at a contact centre. My mum used to be a contact worker, which is what got me interested in becoming a foster carer.'

'I've found fostering to be really rewarding. It's been a good experience for my two sons as they have learnt that not everyone is as fortunate as they are.'

WHAT IS FOSTERING?

Fostering is looking after babies, children and young people in your own home. Children need foster care for lots of different reasons; for example, their parents may be ill, in prison, or having relationship

problems. Some children will have been abused or neglected. Fostering may involve looking after a child for a night or two, a few months or a number of years. Lots of fostered children will eventually return home

to their own families, whereas other children will need permanent care away from their families. Foster carers receive training, support and financial help from the Council. To find out more, please call 020 8314 6655.