

# We opened our hearts and homes

To mark National Foster Care Month, we speak to three women who made the decision to take in children in need of a loving home

## Keeping it in the family

As soon as I plonked myself down on the sofa, a little voice piped up.

'Can we watch something on TV?' Shirley, five, asked.

'Of course,' I replied, as she climbed up to snuggle next to me.

My mum and dad were foster parents and had taken Shirley in when she was just six weeks old. She'd been with us ever since, and we all adored her.

She was one of 17 kids my folks had fostered over the years, including two long-term placements who'd stayed with them until they turned 18.

I think we all hoped Shirley would stay with them, but one day Mum told me, 'They've found Shirley a new family.'

Although we all knew that's what fostering entailed, it didn't make it any easier.

But when Covid struck soon after, lockdown restrictions meant Shirley's

new placement fell through.

'Looks like you're with us a little bit longer!' I told Shirley.

By now, I was almost 30, and while I'd always wanted kids, I'd been afraid of passing on the brittle bone disease I'd been born with.

But realising it might be now or never, I said to Mum, 'Maybe I can be Shirley's long-term foster mum.'

'That's an amazing idea, love,' Mum said.

'It would mean Shirley is always in our lives, too,' Dad added.

With their blessing, I began the application process to become a long-term foster carer.

Although I'd previously done short stays for foster children as respite for their carers, I was worried my condition would affect my bid to be a long-term foster carer.

But the National Fostering Group was supportive



Hayley and Shirley

and assured me it wouldn't.

After just a few weeks, I received the call to say that Shirley was my foster child. We were all thrilled!

Since then, things with Shirley have been going so well that we're going back to the panel soon so I can foster other children.

Seeing the stability that fostering has given Shirley has been so heartwarming.

I've managed to provide her with a loving home and I wholeheartedly recommend fostering to anyone who's able to do it.

Fostering hasn't just changed Shirley's life for the better – but mine, too!

**From Hayley Finch, 35, of Liverpool, Merseyside**



Jayne and her sons

## 70 kids and counting!

Stepping on to the escalator in our local shopping centre with my husband Ken, I spotted something.

It was a stall for the National Fostering Group, and it piqued my interest.

'Hey, look what's down there,' I said, pointing. 'Shall we have a look?'

'Let's do it,' Ken replied.

We had three teenage boys of our own, but we'd talked before about the idea of fostering. I'd worked in a nursery too, and loved being around children.

After chatting to the people at the stall, they arranged to visit our home so they could find out more about us.

But before they came, we discussed it with our boys to make sure they were happy with the idea of us fostering – and luckily, they were.

'I can't wait to expand our family,' I said.

The visit went well, so Ken and I went on a three-day training course and became qualified foster carers.

Afterwards, we went on

holiday with the boys – and on the day we arrived home, a social worker called and said, 'We have a two-week-old baby who needs a home.'

Ken had been adamant we weren't going to foster any child under nine, but after meeting the baby in the hospital, he said, 'We have to bring him home. He's all alone in there.'

So we did, and Ken was as hands-on as he'd been with our own boys.

That was 20 years ago, and in the years since, we've fostered around 70 children for various periods of time.

Our sons got on really well with all of them, and treated them like siblings.

They'd take them out with them, and enjoyed days out bowling, skating and hanging out.

We've kept in touch with most of our foster kids over the years, and the first two boys we ever fostered even came to our son's wedding.

It hasn't all been

easy and we've had some tough times over the years, but we wouldn't change any of it.

We also inspired my sister and one of our sons to become foster parents too, which is wonderful.

Even though Ken and I are getting on in years, our foster children keep us on our toes – and we have no plans to stop anytime soon!

**From Jayne Hughes, 64, of Harmondsworth, London**

● To find out more about fostering, visit [nfa.co.uk](http://nfa.co.uk)



Jayne and Ken

## 'Our home is your home'

Packing up my teaching supplies, I couldn't wait to go home and get into bed.

'What a day,' I sighed.

Having worked as a secondary school language teacher for 30 years, I'd become a tutor for teenagers no longer in school, due to exclusion or health issues.

It brought me into contact with children in care and, after realising how hard it was to find foster families for teenagers, I decided to put myself forward.

My three kids had flown the nest, so I had the space at home.

A year on, after all the checks and training, a social worker called.

'We have an unaccompanied 11-year-old boy who's an asylum seeker,' they said.

'Are you OK to take him in?'

'Yes, of course,' I replied. I got his room ready and when he arrived, we clicked right away.

He quickly settled into life in the UK, and began to excel at his studies and in football, too. Keen to give him some stability, I successfully applied to foster him full-time, so he'd be under my care until he turned 18.

I also took in a second foster child – a 16-year-old girl from Africa.

She'd had a traumatic time getting here, so I did all I could to ensure she had a happy life in Britain.

'Our home is your home,' I told her.

She's now thriving at college and hopes to become a nurse.

My experience has made me realise how important it is to let foster children stay when they're past 18, so we're now looking into the Staying Put scheme, which allows them to stay longer.

I don't want either



Ruth

of my kids to feel like they have to move out as soon as they become a legal adult.

My eldest three children absolutely love the fact that they've gained two new siblings through fostering.

Every Sunday, my 26-year-old daughter and her best friend come round for Sunday dinner, and we always go together as a family to watch our foster son play football.

Fostering has changed my life as much as theirs, and it's one of the best decisions I've ever made.

The number of foster carers in the UK is on the decline – but there's no upper age limit if you're fit and healthy.

If you have room in your home, and in your heart, fostering is one of the best things you'll ever do.

**From Ruth Edwards, 59, of Wilmslow, Cheshire**



Ruth and one of her daughters

By Danielle Lett