

We are FAMILY

Hannah Dickson speaks to two sets of parents who have opened their homes to children needing a new one.



Cara AND CAM



With up to six children living in the house, it's not surprising there are a few sticky handprints around Cara and Cam's home.

But there's one set of handprints that will never be wiped away. The collection of brightly coloured handprints takes pride of place in the living room and is a very special reminder of the children who have come to stay.

Cara and Cam have been foster carers with Child, Youth and Family for the past four years. Cara first came into contact with CYF during her work as a primary school teacher. She had to refer a child in her class to them and was really impressed by the help and care on offer.

"I got to know the carer and saw some really positive changes in that child's life," she says.

Cara and Cam had been caring for Cara's elderly Dad at home and when he passed away, the house felt a little bit empty. They decided to use the empty space to make a difference and went through the process of being accepted and training as caregivers. As they both have other jobs, the couple are mainly available to care for school-age children, but in their first few weeks as carers they took on four toddlers.

"It brought a real buzz into the house," remembers Cam. It made the couple realise they had made the right decision.

As emergency and respite carers, they often have children arrive with very little notice and their immediate concern is letting

children know they are in a safe place where they will be cared for.

"They are in our home because of some kind of trauma," says Cara. "We acknowledge that and we'll say, 'Yes, life sucks for you right now. But while you are here we are your family.'"

That's why each child's handprint goes up on the wall and their photograph is framed and hung in the hallway.

"It's a way of letting them know they matter, and they are not alone," says Cam.

After an initial settling in period, the children quickly adapt to the routine. There's a small-scale assembly line as everyone makes their lunch for school, and chores around the home are shared. The family places a big emphasis on being active and taking part. Swimming lessons and bike rides are part of the routine – Cam recently taught a 15 year old how to ride a bike for the first time. Watching her confidence blossom and seeing her pride in her achievement was heartwarming for the couple.

"We're big on celebrating achievements here," says Cam "If someone gets a certificate at school, we'll do our best to be there to see them receive it. A lot of these kids have never had this support.

"It's not about fixing them. It's about showing them that there's a different way and that they can make some really good choices."

Cara says with kids of a variety of ages and experience living in the house, it's vital to keep the lines of communication open.

"Our home is pretty open in terms of conversations. We talk about anything that comes up and we try to answer any questions. The kids provide support for each other too."

That's not to say the couple don't face significant challenges.

"There have been downs," says Cara. "But we tag team. If it gets too much for one of us the other steps in."

Last year the couple were one of 10 recipients of an Excellence in Foster Care Award, but they say their biggest rewards are the ones they get from the kids – they may not get it in words, but they know when they have made a difference, and many of the children they have cared for ask to stay in touch.

Kirstyn AND CHAD



A special kind of magic happens at the bottom of Kirstyn and Chad's back garden on Auckland's North Shore. Backing on to a reserve, it's the kind of place where chickens roam, veges grow and a plum tree produces enough fruit to keep the entire neighbourhood in puddings and pies.

It's also the perfect place for a mum and her new son to get to know each other and forge a bond to last a lifetime. Charlie (name has been changed) was 16 months old when he joined Kirstyn, Chad and big sister Micaela. He'd been with a foster carer since he was a very little baby, but when it became clear that he needed a permanent home, CYF contacted Kirstyn and Chad who had applied to be carers under the Home for life programme.

The first few weeks were a roller coaster ride of emotion for everyone. Charlie missed

his foster mother, but found having a male in the household a pleasing novelty, bonding quickly with Chad. It took him a little longer to accept Kirstyn.

"To begin with he'd be really upset when he woke up from his afternoon sleep. So we'd just come and sit outside and cuddle and cuddle. It's a very calming place and it was part of getting to know each other.

"We knew it would be hard work. But right from the start we said, 'if there are issues, we will accept those issues'. This is forever."

These days Charlie is a busy, chatty three year old. He's very affectionate but Kirstyn doesn't take the hugs for granted.

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“I like to think I have earned them,” she says. “It’s very special that he has given me this place in his heart.”

Stories are very important in this family’s home and both children are growing up knowing how special they are to their Mum and Dad. After the couple struggled to conceive naturally, Micaela was born with the help of IVF. When the couple wanted to add to their family they decided not to continue with IVF but to look at finding a child who needed a home. Charlie will continue to have contact with his birth parents as he grows but Chad and Kirstyn are the ones he calls Mum and Dad.

“We talk about how he came from someone else’s tummy, but he’s the son of my heart,” says Kirstyn.

The family spent the summer camping and hanging out at the beach, which Charlie adored. He’s come a long way since he first arrived and developmental delays meant he wasn’t good with different textures and hated sand or grass on bare feet.

“We’re a ‘do it’ kind of family and very outdoorsy. But he has adapted to that. Now he loves the sandpit and painting. He just figures things out for himself in his own time.”

Micaela had been asking and praying for a sibling since she was two, so was delighted when Charlie arrived. They have a special relationship. He sat very patiently while she painted his fingernails during our visit (but kept his Batman mask and cape on for good measure!). She’s not convinced the family is complete and has told her parents she’d like a “brother, a sister, and a baby”.

Kirstyn and Chad are just as keen and would like to offer another child a home at some stage. While the process of being accepted as Home for life parents may be rigorous, they say it’s worth it.

“I tell people not to be put off by the process. If you are asking someone to give you someone else’s child, they need to know that you are the right person,” says Kirstyn.

“You need to think about the gift you are giving a child – a new life. Then you discover the amazing gift you get in return – it’s a win-win.”

Becoming A CARER



Child, Youth and Family are always looking for more foster and Home for life carers to open up their homes to children and young people.

If you think this may be something you and your family can offer, you can speak to a social worker on 0508 FAMILY (0508 326 459) or visit www.cyf.govt.nz for more information.

There are many ways that people can care for a child or young person who needs a home.

Foster care generally is for a period of time with the goal that the child will return to their own family. During this time CYF will work with their family so they can safely care for their children.

Home for life is when a child is not able to return home and the Home for life carer becomes their lifelong carer, making the child part of the family.

Adoption where the birth parents choose to make the adoptive parents the child’s legal parents and the child is raised as theirs.



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