

Chapter 9

THE BIRTH PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE

— A safeguarding survivor —

I write this as a birth mum whose family has had years of experience of the child protection system. I have voluntarily placed some of my children into foster care on several occasions when my mental health has been in crisis. On the last of those occasions, my local authority, quite rightly, issued care proceedings to ensure that my children did not experience any further disruption. I recognised the local authority's concerns and began to make significant changes to my life. However, being pregnant during those proceedings, my newborn baby was removed at six days old and placed, against my will, into foster care with an ultimate plan of non-consensual adoption. I continued to make changes to my life, sustained those changes and contested the case. My son came home to me 258 days after he had been taken and has remained in my care since then. I have three children at home with me, and three still in the care system with foster carers. In my own personal experience, and the experience I now have of supporting parents of looked-after children through my work relationships with foster carers can be complex.

As birth parents, we can feel immensely grateful to you for looking after our children when we cannot. We can recognise the value you are bringing to our children's lives, the time that you spend with them, the attention you give them and the truly wonderful, selfless way in which you

open your homes and hearts. We can feel relief that there exists such a 'safety net' in this country, and an odd sense of security in the knowledge that our children are being looked after by someone who has been trained to do so. We can also get attached to you – after all, you have our children, so how could we not?

However, we can also feel immensely resentful towards you for all the same reasons. We can feel a deep and painful jealousy; that time you spend with our children, that attention you shower on them, that should be our time and our attention. We can feel suspicious of your motives for fostering, and we can feel you have 'stolen' our children. We can feel insecure about our own parenting, that you do it better, and that may cause us to pick faults with you or your home or your own family. We can feel fear that our children prefer you and may not wish to come home to us. We can feel that we are 'competing' with you, and this is further exacerbated when it comes to things like Christmas and birthdays. We can feel a real and palpable hatred for you, especially when we think about you cuddling our children or sharing any sort of bond with them.

My experiences have been a bit of everything, all intertwined with a deep-seated guilt for failing my children in the first instance. It takes courage from the very depths of our soul to allow ourselves to identify the positives foster carers bring to our children's lives. It is not an easy task. I now spend a great deal of time writing my blog and talking to birth parents to try to help them get to that point. But there are things you, as foster carers, can do to help:

- Remain, at all times, respectful of the birth parents' role and recognise that we are, in most cases, the experts on our children's lives. Whether the plan for the children is a rehabilitation home, special guardianship, long-term fostering or adoption, we are always still their birth parents. It might be all we have to cling to at times.

- Use our expertise to help you in your role. If we as birth parents are treated in this way, we are far more likely to engage with not only you, but also the local authority as a whole. We might have a particular style of parenting or have a particular routine our children follow. Things that are important to us and that our children are used to, like the gentle parenting approach or a baby wearing cloth nappies, may not be familiar to you, but it would have such a positive effect on our relationship if you were to research them, or even try them.
- Support breastfeeding however you can. This is tremendously important if you have our newborn or young babies. When you are separated from your child at birth, or soon after, breastfeeding is all you can give that child. It's something you can do for them that nobody else can. I cannot stress enough how valuable it is to have a foster carer who understands this and supports the mother with this. It may be arranging to collect breastmilk from the mother, or that she can bring milk to contact sessions, but however it is done, your role is key.
- Be aware of special family occasions and promote good contact. One of our foster carers always ensures that my children send their siblings (and me!) birthday cards. This helps so much in terms of relationship building between family members – as well as between you and the birth parents – and can help to break down barriers.
- Be mindful of the importance of our family connection. The time you are spending with our children is time we are not. We don't know what our children are doing when they are with you, and this alone can be very difficult. I remember looking outside at the sky and knowing my children were

under it – but that was all I knew. As such, being given photographs of activities can be very welcome. Conversely, it can also feel a bit like your nose is being rubbed in it – so do ask the birth parent if it is something they would like! Other things – such as ensuring that we know when parents' evenings are at school, or if our children have assemblies or performances – are also very important to our family.

- Contact can be a very emotional time for the whole family. It is sometimes very difficult for parents to engage in contact, particularly under supervised conditions. Imagine if someone was watching you, in an artificial environment, using a notepad to record your every move. It isn't easy, and although I struggled through it, some parents don't have the strength that I did. I can't bear the thought of any child left waiting at contact for parents who don't show up, but I do understand why some can't commit to it. I don't think there's much you can do other than to try to understand, too. The vast majority of parents don't want to hurt their children and don't want to let them down, but it's not always as simple as that.
- Keep in touch, when you can. If a child returns home, many parents simply want to concentrate on looking after their family themselves and moving on from an awful period in their lives. Others, however, will want to keep in touch with you, in whatever way possible, and I'd hope that that would be reciprocated. My youngest son's foster carers are part of his jigsaw. When he came home, his foster mum sent me a text to say, 'Your son is coming home to you, where he belongs.' She and her husband sent gifts and cards to us all and they are in his memory box for when he is older. He has met them once since he's been home, although he has no memory of them. I think it is

tremendously important that he is able to meet them again when he's older, if he chooses to. I will certainly always be grateful to them. They gave him the love, care and attention I was not, for reasons beyond my control, able to. Fostering is truly a wonderful thing.