

Section Three

Partnerships and the caring team – the wider caring network

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Partnership – the caring team

Jill Wain

The wider caring network

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Fostering the future

**11th biennial
IFCO conference**

Melbourne, July 1999

Partnership — the caring team

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Let me introduce myself. My name is Jill Wain, I am and have been married to a wonderful and supportive husband, Greg, for 34 years and we have seven children. Three of my children are the result of our fostering experience and I have four birth children. The children range in age from 7 to 33 years. Up until recently five were still living at home but major house renovations have come up with some creative options that have actually moved two on, but with threats that they will be back when the house is finished. We will wait and see. That fridge with food in it seems to hold the key, or is it something else?

So let me pose the question, what did I think fostering was going to be about? On the positive side I guess it was having fun times with kids, playing at the beach, reading stories, games at the park, playing on the tractor and offering a child a few experiences they may not have had, and perhaps there would be the occasional vomit that I would certainly ask my husband to clean up (I am not very good at dealing with this), the odd tantrums and perhaps the poo smeared on the walls as a bit of a balance.

In contrast, why did we look after that drug addicted baby that screamed day and night, the three-year-old that threw tantrums constantly, the teenager that we had to go and pick up from the police station? The teasing of our own children and the fighting and arguments that that can cause. The kids that scream and do not do as they are asked, because they are too angry and suffering from the effects of trauma and loss that we sometimes fail to recognise. They just want to be back with their mum or dad. The back chat and calling you names, 'I hate you, you're not my mum', 'why should I do as you asked - I hate you'. The breaking of toys that

our children have always taken care of and looked after for years, and then little Johnny pulls the wheels off the cars or smashes the Lego. The parents that don't like the idea of you doing a better job than them, looking after their child. The visits to the psychiatric hospital with people throwing the odd chair, peering into the pram and saying rather odd things to you, and the visits to the prison were just part of the week's work. No worker came with you, why would they? This was part of my job as a caregiver and I never questioned it. The mum or dad who is drug or alcohol affected who were abusive. I guess you start to ask yourself why? Why did I want to get involved with all of this? Life is difficult enough, so why take on more?

I intend to present this paper as an anecdotal account of my/our experiences as a family involved in foster care for more than twenty years. I hope the anecdotes will illustrate an underlying philosophical position in relation to foster care as a partnership. A caring team. A major challenge to the field is to maintain and develop caring teams, where all the active participants and their respective roles are acknowledged as vital to the overall care of the children and young people we care for.

The theme of this presentation will focus on working successfully using a partnership approach. It is hoped this partnership is a positive relationship with equal partners being able to offer support both personally and professionally with caring relationships being made, aimed at reuniting families who for some reason or other have been separated.

We first thought about fostering in 1977. We then had three children of our own, at that time aged 6, 8 and 10 years old. I liked children, particularly babies,



Jill Wain is a foster carer and the Manager, Melton Foster Care Service in Melbourne. In her personal life, the Wain family have fostered for 23 years and have two children, 22 and 17 years, who have lived in their family for many years. They also have a seven-year-old child who has been with the family since the age of 3 weeks who now has a permanent care case plan. The philosophy of the Wain family is to provide a home for a child when and while it is needed and to provide the support required to return these children to their own family wherever possible.

but felt that three children of our own was enough to raise financially. Perhaps there were other children and families out there that needed some help in the short term, so perhaps we might be able to do something for them and still meet my desire to parent more children.

My husband and I talked about it together first for a while before talking about it with our children. We all agreed that fostering would need to be a family decision and that it would not work unless we did it as a team together. The children thought it was a good idea so we applied. Thankfully we passed whatever those requirements were and were approved and 23 years later we are still fostering.

I look back over those years and think about the things we have learnt as a family, the friendships we have made, the families we have been able to help and how we have worked together as part of a caring team. We have shared our knowledge with each other and I think we have been respected, we have cried together as a family, seen some great rewards, and watched progress being made as children have gone back home which after all was the main aim of our involvement.

We have grown as a family and I think my children have learnt from the experience of fostering. It has not always been good times. It has sometimes been hard, the kids have been difficult, my children have probably suffered having to deal at times with conflict, different rules for them and the foster child, conflict with my extended family, but overall I think everyone has benefited in some way from our experience.

When we were finally assessed and started fostering, I never considered it would only be the children we would be involved with. I believed that my role would be to help the families as well as the children. It was the parents who had faced some sort of crisis in their lives which meant they had to be separated from their children – either voluntarily or they had been removed because of some sort of risk. Often parents did not have extended family or close friends that could help out or they could turn to so foster care was the only other option available to them till they could work

towards getting their children back into their care.

To this day I have no idea how many children we have fostered. One thing I do know is that, beside the short term emergency placements, the reception and respite placements that have come and gone over the years, we have been able to offer a placement for 22 years, another for 17 years, and one for 7 years – all full-time. I know that people like statistics and other foster families are much better at record keeping than me – at least they know how many children they have fostered. I did a quick sum which added up to a total of 17,890 nights that these three children alone have had a bed to sleep in at our house. That adds up to 49 years – so it is no wonder I have had to dye my hair red!

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I though I would like to share with you today some of the experiences good and not so good that have been part of fostering for us as a family over the past 24 years. I would also like to share with you how some of the other players that form part of the fostering team have seen it, like:

- my children
- the foster children in our care
- the birth families, and
- a worker's perspective

This is an opportunity to share some of their stories and experiences with you today. I would like to highlight what is has been like for us as a foster family to be part of a caring team.

I will start with some of the memories that stand out for me over those years and then follow with the perspectives of one of my natural children who is now 30 years old, married and a foster parent herself; another of my children that we eventually adopted as a result of fostering who has lived with us for 22 years; and the words of two birth mothers whom I have regular contact with.

I thought I would also share with you some thoughts from one of my foster children's birth fathers who has since died of a drug overdose, but left behind some powerful messages. I will also include my thoughts from a professional perspective as the manager of Melton Foster Care. All these perspectives make up part of a team that I clearly see as foster care. We have not always agreed but we have all been able to have our say and work together in the best interest of the children and families we care for.

In the early days I always opened my home to birth families. Three visits a week from a mum, helping her cook and learn to care for her child, were just part of the expectation of fostering. How could you expect a young mum to care, cook and look after her child if she had not had a positive experience of that herself. Parenting, I believe, is a learning experience; it does not necessarily come naturally to everyone. It is made up of our own experiences of being parented.

Fostering for me was building up a relationship with parents, and feeling you were able to offer that extended family type support that made it seem all worthwhile.

I remember perhaps that support going a bit too far on one occasion. We were on holidays in Sydney. We lived in Melbourne at the end of a narrow dirt road and there were not many houses on the road so neighbours knew when you were coming and going. We received a phone call from our neighbour at the bottom of the road saying that my husband's utility had just driven off

down the road. Had we loaned it to anybody? We hadn't, but being a rather calm man my husband said he would wait till the end of the day and just see what happened. Later that afternoon a phone call confirmed that the car had returned and it was loaded up with furniture. I decided to ring home. Birth mum answers the phone, 'Hi Jill, we had nowhere to go so thought you wouldn't mind if we stayed at your place while you were away. I promise I will keep things tidy'. A little shocked, I kindly said this was not on and that perhaps this would be viewed as overstepping the mark (which it was) and that they would have to go. They moved out the next day.

Another time we were asked to do some respite care for a mum with a young baby. She had two older children and then found herself not coping very well with a new baby and a broken marriage. She did not want to burden her family with her problem and so, hearing about foster care, decided this was where she would turn to for support. Friends would often ask me why we did this type of foster care. After all it was just cheap baby sitting while a mum went out and had a good time. I thought about this for a while, but didn't feel that this was what we were doing as we tried to get out occasionally and would leave our children with grandparents or relatives – and no one questioned me if we were going out to have a good time or not.

On a couple of occasions I remember a rather embarrassed mum when she returned to pick up her daughter on Sunday night. She asked if my older children had talked about having seen her on Saturday night as they had been at the same night club and she had got a bit drunk (of course my kids wouldn't have dobbed her in). It didn't seem to bother me. She was having a break and who was I to judge where she went or what she did? It was her time to recharge her batteries so she could better care for her kids for the rest of the month that she was home full-time with them. Two years ago that mum died of breast cancer. Thank God she enjoyed a few good Saturday nights out when she was well, thanks to foster care and its support.

After I had fostered for a few years, I started to question what social workers studied and what they were being taught, why did they use jargon that parents didn't understand and how was the system helping parents get their children back after they had taken them away?

During one child's placement, I remember my husband and I attending meetings with the birth parents to help with the language difficulties – yes we are talking about language difficulties between Australian-born Anglo Saxons and workers! The language used caused these parents to feel inadequate and their response would be aggression.

Apart from the long words and the social work jargon, this dad would be infuriated that his son was referred to as a client, rather than by his name. Imagine the same scenario with an ethnic family with little or no English. How do they cope?

I decided to enrol in a Welfare Studies course at Phillip Institute full-time for two years with no intentions of working in this area, but just to see the other side of the situation. I had been working in film and television for many years in the wardrobe department and, if you have to deal with difficult actresses and actors and TV kids, then I guess you can deal with most people so why did this team of people seem to not get on?

I completed the course and I am not sure if I was any the wiser, but I did understand better the frustrations and the limitations that a working environment imposed. So we just kept on fostering and I kept working in television.

I did do some work in a locum capacity at a foster care agency for a while some eight years ago. While I was working there part-time, a referral came in to place 6-month-old triplets. I thought how fantastic for some foster family to be able to foster triplets – but that was not how others saw it. After many phone calls by workers in the agency I was shocked to find nobody would take the three babies together. Here was a young mum studying who gets herself pregnant and then finds her luck turn to have three non-identical babies. She needed some help as she had no extended family in Melbourne.

Finally my frustration led me to ring the agency we fostered with and I told my worker that if they got a referral for triplets I was prepared to take them. I rang home and asked my family what if I came home with not just one baby, but three, how did they feel? Everyone thought it was OK. So after phone calls were made and paperwork signed, I went home that night with three babies. They came once a fortnight for a few months. My kids helped encourage them to crawl and then we had three babies going in different directions. Their mum wanted a longer break. So they came into care full time

The next problem for us was child care, no family day carer wanted three babies together either. So for the three days that I worked, the babies went to two separate day carers – one day one carer had two of them and the other had one, then they would swap. We had to try and remember who went where which was a bit of a nightmare. We took them out places, down to the beach house, back packs and a triplet pram and our other four children. We coped. Mum then decided she could not take them back and it was suggested her mother in Queensland might care for them. These babies were now nearly one and had become rather attached to our family. How could I just pack them up and put them on a plane and send them to Queensland?

There were lots of offers to take the babies to Queensland but we finally arranged with our worker that I would go and stay with them for a few days till they got to know their grandmother whom they had not seen. This was a rewarding experience and I think in the children's best interest, as I was able to offer than some continuity of care which sometimes we don't think about too much.

Then there were those access visits – hearing a child scream and yell that they didn't want to go or having a child who would hide, was hard to deal with. One of my foster kids one day said to me, 'You never ask me if I want to see my mum, you just speak to that social worker and tell me I have to go.' It made me think, am I including this child as part of the team? She wanted to be asked not told. Finally she said to me one day, 'Mum it is obvious you like

my mother much more than I do so why don't you just go and visit her and leave me to play with my friends.' For some time I would go off and visit her mother and leave her at home. She later joined me again without protest.

Another difficult time was when my parents were over for Sunday lunch. They never had people over except if they invited them. We were sitting around and a birth family that we had offered foster care to some months earlier arrived with a few beers in tow. My parents were shocked. The language, what were we exposing their grandchildren to? Coming uninvited was not what they liked. So, they left. The next day my husband spoke to my mother and told her this was our life and our decision to foster and that they needed to keep their morals to themselves. They appeared earlier to be supportive of us fostering but really could not cope. Several years later my parent told me they had re-written their will and wanted us to know any foster children that were in our care long term would be included. Perhaps we should have told them foster care is more than the kids.

Another example of team work is being able to raise and discuss things that are important with everyone's perspective being heard. At times it can be particularly difficult when plans are made and as a care giver you do not always feel they are right decisions or in the child's best interest. You're the one living with the child and you often feel that people are not seeing it from the child's perspective as, after all, they have not had the same involvement as you.

The legacy of a birth father

Dad had little contact with his son for four years. He was in and out of jail and had never acknowledged he was the child's father. He was just there at access visits to support the mum. Given time he gets to like this little boy and starts to think he could be this little boy's father. He wants to be more involved so claims he made a mistake earlier and he is the boy's father. He goes and gets advice from his solicitor, he wants more access, he wants unsupervised access, after all he is the child's dad and has not been given a fair go.

As a caregiver you start to wonder why he is doing this now, it really is a bit late, he had his chance.

... I never considered it would only be the children we would be involved with. I believed that my role would be to help the families as well as the children. It was the parents who had faced some sort of crisis in their lives which meant they had to be separated from their children ...

Over the next two years we try hard to get some sort of amicable relationship going with this dad. We arrange to meet him for coffee on a regular basis and focused that time on talking about his son, agreeing that we both wanted what is best for him. Some of my concerns about this dad are alleviated. He isn't really that bad, he is trying hard, he has stopped taking drugs and is making a real effort. He is just angry and upset but it's not really directed at us, he is mainly cross with the DHS and himself. He doesn't like what he had done in the past – drugs, a lengthy prison sentence – and now he realises that he has left his son too late to get his son back and he feels he has let his son down. His son had been out of his parents' care for five years now and has a permanent care case plan which clearly means his son will not be returning home to his care.

I learnt a lot from this dad and last year I was saddened by his unexpected death from a drug overdose. I offered to read the eulogy at his funeral as there were no family members, no relatives to be found after an extensive search – except his six-year-old son. I wrote these words for that little boy and I would like to share some of them with you today.

My family came to know this dad about six years ago through the birth of a young boy called Mitchell. Mitchell was born on the 21 March 1992 and came to live with our family in foster care as his mother was in a psychiatric hospital and not well enough to look after him. His mother had always acknowledged from the beginning that this friend of hers, who sometimes came to access with her or was at her bedside at times when she was in hospital, was the father of this little boy. It took some time for this friend to accept that role of father. He would come with Mitchell's mother to visit, playing with him when he was little and encouraging his girlfriend to be involved with her son. He was a wonderful support to his girlfriend and Mitchell in those early years and we are grateful for that.

In 1996 things started to change. This man fell in love with this little boy and he became a passion, with him openly acknowledging that Mitchell was his son. He did this by adding his name to Mitchell's birth certificate. It was after he had made this commitment that we started to see the determination, spirit, and fight that we will remember as Mitchell's father.

He wanted to see more of his son and he fought for longer and more access. He went to the library and read books to learn more about young children. He sought advice on how to deal with 4-5 year olds. But he was not going to give up his fight here. He wanted time alone with his son without people watching him and supervising the time he spent with his son, he did not want people questioning his ability to manage as a father. This was a goal this dad achieved earlier last year.

He was proud of his fight to get more time with his son. I would drop Mitchell off and then go back a couple of hours later and pick him up. Mitchell wanted to go, he enjoyed being with his dad and getting to know him. His dad never gave up, always seeking that extra five minutes with Mitchell wherever he could, and me going into a bit of a panic if they did not return on time, thinking the worst.

Because of this dad's endurance, endless energy and persistence, Mitchell has some very fond memories and important messages that his dad

talked to him about. He talked to Mitchell about always telling the truth and promised Mitchell he would never lie to him. He talked to him about drugs and how dangerous they can be, explaining to him that he had been in jail when Mitchell was a baby because he was involved in drugs. He was very sorry about that as it meant he had missed out spending time seeing and playing with him when he was younger. He also told Mitchell that bad things could happen to you if you get caught up with drugs and he hoped that Mitchell would never consider this when he was grown up. I guess these are things we often don't consider talking to 6-year-olds about as we feel we need to protect them and that the truth may hurt too much.

Dad, Mum and Mitchell had some fun and happy times together and I would like to share some of those with you.

Kicking the football or soccer ball in the park with your dad (and I remember being asked, 'Where do five-year-olds get so much energy?'), playing cricket with the yellow cricket bat that mum and dad gave him for Christmas. Swimming at the Aquatic centre, taking a boat ride down the Yarra, a birthday cake (baked by mum and dad) sitting at the All Star Cafe at the Crown Casino for Mitchell's sixth birthday are things for him to remember. The St Kilda adventure playground, the fun factory, the South Melbourne Library and many more outings together. These things I believe, were equally as much fun for this dad and he too has taken those treasured moments he shared with his son with him.

And at home living with us nearly every night there is the reminder of this father. The Nintendo 64 bleeping, kids arguing it's 'my turn', I am going to switch it off, it's mine, you know dad bought it for me and I don't have to share it with you if I don't want to. Your presence will be with Mitchell and us every day. Mitchell will not forget you and we will ensure he never does forget his real dad.

The last thing we have that this dad wrote to Mitchell was on his sixth birthday card and I will leave you with part of that message:

wish we could be with you on the most important day of your life, your sixth

Birthday. We are so proud of you in every way. You are always in our thoughts, lots of hugs and kisses your one and only mother and father, we love you.'

Now, my fostered/adoptive son's perspective, having been in care most of his life.

I don't quite know where to start, so I will tell you a little bit about myself. I'm twenty-two and have been living with who I now see as my mum and dad for as long as I can remember. I also have brothers and sisters, of which some are adopted, some are still fostered and some not. I work part-time as an after school child carer and I am currently studying social work at one of Melbourne's universities.

I think the reason it worked for me was not because of anything the system particularly did for me personally ... but rather I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by people that cared about me and who I grew to care for and feel loved and wanted by.

My experience of being fostered and then adopted by my foster family and the continual contact with DHS and agency workers while I was younger has led me to the social work area of study after first starting a course in sport and recreation. Having witnessed and personally experienced the many highs and lows of being a foster child and part of a family that fosters and adopts, I felt I wanted to put something back into the service which has worked so well for me. Though I must admit, after a couple of years into my course, I have become more interested in areas other than child protection, such as koori issues, counselling and looking at structural change in social work organisations today. Unfortunately there

is an increasing pressure put forward by funding bodies to be more quantity productive, which as we know, often disregards the quality of work output.

Being fostered and then adopted when I was 6 years has given me all the opportunities I may not have had if I stayed with my natural parent. I am not just referring to material and educational opportunities, but rather an opportunity to be part of a large loving family where acceptance of difference and mutual respect is valued. My experience of being part of the Wain clan has been so good I often forget about having been adopted, as I view mum, dad, my brothers and sisters as the people I was always meant to be with and my family. Not just in the good times but through the bad times as well. Because we all know part of being a family is not always 'happy families.'

However, while having been fostered and then adopted has worked for me, I don't want to be written off as just another success story of the system. I am well aware that the system does not work for everybody and wish to acknowledge that. I think the reason it worked for me was not because of anything the system particularly did for me personally (although I was able to go back to caregivers I knew which meant I only had one real placement in my life which I think is really important) but rather I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by people that cared about me and who I grew to care for and feel loved and wanted by.

People in our family have always looked out for each other. I remember I was asked if I was happy that we foster a baby girl who was still in the hospital. I went with mum and some of the other kids to see her and when I saw her I told mum it would be OK to take her home. She too is still with mum and dad 17 years later. I might add that when we have had the occasional argument or disagreement and she has got on my nerves, I have asked myself why did I agree she could come.

When I was at primary school, I remember my younger foster sister, who mum and dad also adopted (though she had different biological parents than me), was being picked on and teased by her friends about being fostered. I can't explain or remember my thoughts but I

was outraged and filled with anger, so I jumped up, grabbed the sticky tape and entangled it in one of the girl's hair, thinking MY SISTER WAS NOT GOING TO BE PICKED ON. It was a natural reaction where I saw myself clearly as being the older brother wanting to protect my younger sister. This inclination to protect and look after her wouldn't have happened without the close family environment which both my parents created where we were all accepted as equal family members. I wish I could tell you how my parents did it, perhaps they can. Mum was always accepting of my birth mother and would often follow her up to just check if she was all right. I did go back home to live with her for a while after I had been in care for a couple of years but when it did not look like working out, my birth mother brought me back to mum and dad to care for me again. I remember mum and dad talking to my birth mother about keeping me when it was obvious that I would not be able to return to my birth mother's care when I was about 5 years old. My birth mother agreed she would sign adoption consent if Jill and Greg could keep me. I guess she felt comfortable that this was the right place for me to be as well. My birth mother went on to have more children, twins who also ended up in foster care and were later adopted. She then married and had three more children who are now teenagers, and they stayed with her and have not come into the system so I guess things worked out for my birth mother and some of her kids in the end. Perhaps it was the time mum put in to teaching her when I was a baby that helped, who knows, I haven't asked her that yet but I might one day.

My daughter's perspective, having grown up with foster children around for many years, and then having gone on to foster herself.

Foster care has been part of my family for as long as I can remember. Over the years I have welcomed and said goodbye to numerous 'brothers' and 'sisters' and I have gained a few permanent ones as well. I feel I have benefited greatly from watching my parents and family welcome others into their lives – from kids, parents and extended families, to workers and other professionals. I think we have grown as

a family not only in number but also emotionally and I personally feel I have gained enormously from our fostering experience.

Having grown up as a part of a foster family and then going on to become a foster parent myself, I realise that I have been given experiences that many people may never have and I am grateful for the knowledge and life skills that these experiences have taught me.

I think I must have been 9 or 10 when we first started fostering and, being a girl who loved dolls, I remember really enjoying having a baby in the house. I have fond memories of many of the children who have come and gone. I still have vivid memories of the days that we picked up babies that we were to foster not knowing then that they would still be with us 7, 17 and 22 years later. I remember one birth mother who spent a lot of time at our house and I remember her wanting to play with me and my Barbie dolls as I don't think she had ever really had a Barbie of her own to play with. I always liked helping with the babies and children who came into our home and over the years I suppose I was allowed to take on more responsibility in helping with their care.

About 7 years ago I became more involved when a small baby came into the care of my family. I had just returned from an overseas holiday and had deferred from Uni so I looked after this baby (Mitchell) during the day when Mum and Dad were at work and they took over in the evening. I was involved in all areas of his life from taking him to the health centre to taking him to access with his mother and her boyfriend. Mitchell would come with me wherever I went. At times I was needed to help out on film sets during

the day as I was studying film and Mitchell would happily come with me. This was never a disruption to either him or myself. Over the next few years I continued to look after Mitchell – when I was at Uni three days a week he started child care, but stayed home with me the other two. When I began working he still stayed home with me at least one day a week right up until he went to school.

About five years ago mum and dad received a phone call asking if our family could care for another baby. At the time Mum was working in a new job and was not in a position to take on a full time placement of a young baby so she suggested to the worker that maybe I would be willing to look after the baby. I had just finished Uni and was not working at the time so I said 'yes' when asked if I would look after the baby. I don't think that I really had much time to think about this as the placement was needed that day but as I had helped look after so many babies that had come and gone in our house and I had a lot of experience in looking after Mitchell, I wasn't daunted by the task of becoming a mother within a few hours. The only difference this time would be that I would be looking after the baby day and night as this is the commitment I had made as mum knew she was going to be too busy to get up to a young baby every night. I think even if I had been given days to think about this I am sure my decision would have been the same.

This baby (Summer) stayed with me from when she was about 5 weeks old until she was almost 9 months old and while it certainly wasn't easy (she never slept and I think mum probably secretly knew!) I felt a great sense of achievement in having helped her through the first few (difficult) months of her life. At the time I was still living at my parents' house so I had their support and help in caring for Summer and she was welcomed into our family like all the other kids. Even though Summer moved on, I am lucky as she is still a part of my life. When I got married several years ago she was at my wedding and she continues to come and stay with my husband and me once a month for a few days. Of course one of the first things Summer wants to do when she comes to stay is to go and see

Jill and 'The Boys' – my mum and brothers whom she has known her entire life. Summer was really my first formal placement and the beginning of not only being a foster sister but an official foster parent as well.

I have continued to foster since getting married and moving out of home and over the years many of my friends have asked why I would commit myself to looking after a baby day and night, especially when it's someone else's child. The answer to that question was fairly difficult as it wasn't something that I had really thought about – it just seemed that it was the natural thing to do.

I suppose when fostering has been a part of you for more than 24 years it does seem pretty natural. To me a family consists of many extra people and I know that I have always regarded any children who came into our family as brothers and sisters with the only difference being that maybe they had an extra Mum and/or Dad. Sometimes I think I am the odd one out having only one of each. I know I am lucky to have the knowledge and to have been taught the skills that enable me to look after a child and if I can help a family by using these skills, then I don't see why I shouldn't.

When I was asked to write this I began thinking about the experiences that we have shared as a family over the years – the kids, the parents and families, the workers – all of whom have added something to our lives in one way or another. I have some sad memories and memories of days not running as smoothly as planned but overall I think the benefits for myself, our foster children and their families and for my own family have far outweighed the bad times.

Having grown up as a part of a foster family and then going on to become a foster parent myself, I realise that I have been given experiences that many people may never have and I am grateful for the knowledge and life skills that these experiences have taught me. I don't know if I will go on to foster as many children as my parents but it's hard to imagine our family without a few extras for Sunday dinner.

A birth mother's perspective

As a single mother without much family support my son and I have benefited immensely from our foster care experience and the weekends he has away. My son Kyle looks forward all month to his exciting weekend at the Wain house. The house is so full of people and activities compared with our quiet abode. Kyle gets the chance to play with other children varying in ages and an opportunity to be part of a large family where adults' attention is spread between many. In comparison in our flat he is the centre of the universe and I think it is important to learn to share the attention with others. For me personally the opportunity to have some time to myself is invaluable. It gives me a chance to do all the things I cannot do with a four year old. I go to the pictures, sleep in, go for long walks and clean up, just to name a few. It also gives me the chance to miss Kyle, making me grateful for his existence and ready to devote my time and energy when he returns. Foster care weekends have improved the quality of my life and my relationship with my son.

I don't think people realise how important foster care is for some families and when funding cuts stop important preventive work being done, I wonder what happens to those other families who have missed out through no fault of their own ...

I moved about two years ago and had to go on a waiting list with a new foster care agency where I was then living. I did not get any respite care and as a result DHS became involved and my son was removed from my care as I was not coping. I really missed that support and with it my son may not have been removed. I recently moved back to the area where I got a lot of support from the foster care agency and workers

involved and was lucky enough that my son was able to go back to the Wain family for respite care.

I don't think people realise how important foster care is for some families and when funding cuts stop important preventive work being done, I wonder what happens to those other families who have missed out through no fault of their own, either because there is a shortage of caregivers or lack of funding to offer that type of support.

I am extremely grateful that I have been able to be part of a group of people who really care about me and my son and I do not know what may have happened without the added support.

Another birth mother's thoughts

In some ways my son really benefits from spending time with Jill, Greg and their family, having the opportunity to be surrounded by lots of people and the dynamics involved such as sharing and group decisions. He is also experiencing a family which is made up of more than just an isolated mother and her child. Importantly James gets to experience other people's way of life and is able to interact with other people who are important to him other than just me as we spend a lot of time alone with each other.

Also, apart from myself, James doesn't really have any permanent fixtures in his life, no extended family or friends that care about him or make him feel special and wanted. So when he spends weekends with Jill and Greg I feel he is with people he has got to know who want to spend time with him and are interested in him besides just me. I benefit from this time as it allows me to breath my own air and search for myself without fear and excuses. I would find it very difficult without this extra support from people that care.

My agency perspective

I guess my search for a better understanding and insight into families has led me to further studies and I gained a postgraduate qualification in Social Work about ten years ago. Like the twists and turns of foster care, my interest to take fostering a step further has led me to the position of Manager of Melton Foster Care. I feel this job has enabled me to put into practice

some of my beliefs and philosophies on how I think foster care should and could be. I am the first to acknowledge that fostering has changed over the years. The children, I think, are often more difficult to manage, bearing in mind what they have been through, and the problems faced by families today are often very complex. It is seen by many that we need to protect our caregivers and I guess we do at times but I think it should be judged on a case to case basis and not an agency philosophy. Often this type of approach leaves little contact with others within the team. Clear, open and honest communication and being clear about our roles and the expectation of those roles are paramount, as is respect of each other. Remember we are a team, that without each other we could not function.

How would you feel if your child was in foster care and you had never met the person looking after your child? I **would scream and yell and be very angry.** This is what happens to many birth parents. We need to seek to better understand what is happening and to all go out of our way to work together as a team where everyone's input is seen as important and worthwhile.

I guess I might run my agency differently from others, given my personal experiences, but to ask a caregiver to take a sibling group of eight to me is not out of the question, and there was a caregiver in my program prepared to do this recently. The single mums on pensions who care for sibling groups are encouraged and supported. Contact with birth families is encouraged, often this is at our office and not in the foster family home due to needing to protect foster parents, but that doesn't mean foster parents and birth parents don't get to meet each other. After all, being a mum, you always like to know from the horse's mouth how your child is going in placement. Kids need to know that they can talk to their foster family about their parents and this is difficult if you as caregivers have never met them.

I want, as a manager, to build an environment where all members of the team – caregivers, children, birth family, workers – can all feel comfortable to call into our office and make a cup of tea or coffee and talk

about how things are going. The door is always open.

Then there are those access visits at Melton where my workers are encouraged to help mothers bathe their babies and children, and go shopping with them to buy food to cook for their kids' lunch while they are having access. We encourage parents to attend visits with the foster mother or the worker to other professionals involved so they know what's going on with their child. I don't want to give the impression that this is easy for all those involved, but it does show we care and that we are prepared to make an effort. At times we need to be a bit creative. Parents still need to be given a go, particularly if they are ready to make a commitment to have their children returned to their care. We all need to help in making this happen as well. *You cannot give a foster parent, a young person in care, natural parents and workers a list of tasks and then all sit back waiting for it to happen. We need to work together as a team on these tasks that achieve the best outcomes for the children we care for, whatever our work.*

I think to get the best out of foster care in the year 2000 and beyond for any of the stakeholders that are involved, we need to work with each other in a collaborative way that acknowledges the importance of each other's role. It should recognise the importance of the concept of partnership, be creative and prepared to give new things a go. We cannot work in isolation and we need to respect each other, working to achieve positive outcomes for the children we care for.

Reconciliation is often an issue for all of us involved in foster care and as members of an important team we need to work together in the best interest of the children we care for to achieve some sort of harmony for all involved. Without this a caring team in the year 2000 will not be possible.

As a caregiver, mother, professional and whatever other role I might have, I think we can overcome the problems we face, reconcile any differences, work together, acknowledge each other's contribution to the team and always focus on the needs of the children we care for as being paramount – keeping

in mind that other members of the caring team are vital to the overall care of the children and young people. Keep up the good work. □