

Combining careers

Written by
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Lisa Butcher works hard to provide a 24-hour childcare service, combining the challenges and joys of foster caring with childminding. As well as juggling the needs of childminded and foster children with that of her own, she manages adoptive and birth parents, medical specialists and her fluctuating emotions.

“Will I get a new mummy and daddy when I move house?” is just one of the questions Lisa Butcher comes across in her emotional rollercoaster of a job as a childminder and foster carer.

Lisa became interested in foster caring seven years ago when she childminded a little girl who was being fostered locally. Her husband joined her in becoming a foster carer too. She appreciates the support he offers in the role, “Bad things have happened to some of these children and it’s helpful to have a sounding board.”

Lisa also has a social worker assigned to her family, “I’ve always got someone on the end of the phone to talk things through; I feel like I’ve got more support than some childminders.”

The right balance

Lisa and her husband foster children aged from birth to 8 years old. Her own children are 9 and 12, and she has fostered and childminded for most of their lives. She values the way they are with the children coming into their home, “My children are superstars. They play with the children and treat them like brothers and sisters.”

Foster children have lots of appointments with medical professionals as well as contact with birth parents; it can be a lot to juggle with the childminded children too. Lisa has learned when to say no. She doesn’t take children to contact meetings with

birth parents, and she only cares for one foster child at a time. She explains, “One fits in with my family very nicely. You have to take everyone’s feelings into account and think about how you can cope with everything you take on.”

Managing emotions

An emotionally intense time is two weeks before a foster child moves on to their adoptive family. The adoptive parents spend this time getting to know the foster child in the foster home. They’ll come in early and give the child breakfast; then they’ll come for the evening and put them to bed, eventually staying for the whole day. During that time, Lisa will be keeping an eye on the new parents and encouraging them, while at the same time taking care of the childminded children. “It’s so hard to say goodbye, especially when they have been with us for a long time. I cry sometimes; then have to turn to the childminded children with a smile on my face.”

The children will miss the foster child, too, and ask questions about them, as will the community who see us at toddler groups, or at school. That’s a good sign, though, as it means they have formed positive relationships and integrated into the community. “It’s lovely to see the foster children play with the other children in my setting,” explains Lisa. “They learn so much from being with other children, and feel more comfortable with other



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children, answering questions such as: ‘Why aren’t you living with your mummy and daddy anymore?’

Confidentiality can be an issue, working out when to share information with other parents, or even your own children. Lisa says,



"Once I had to tell the parents about a foster child's illness, and I gave them the choice of removing their child from my setting. It was a risk, but they trusted my judgment, and it worked out well."

Expect the unexpected

You never quite know how long a child will be with you. One boy was supposed to be with Lisa for a month and stayed for three years. You still need to work to Ofsted ratios. Lisa says, "I always keep

a space open for a foster child." If childminding work is quiet, you can always agree to take on another foster child.

The rewards of caring for other people's children are high, and when fostering, Lisa sums it up, "It's amazing to see a child develop with us, and move on to an adoptive family, or to go back to birth parents that have made a real effort to turn their lives around and get their children back." ■

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CAREER ADVICE

Things to consider if you are interested in being both a childminder and foster carer:

- Some local authorities don't allow childminders to combine their work with foster caring. Check with social services or your early years development worker
- The impact it will have on your childminding setting and your own family. Think carefully about the child you are being asked to care for and how they will fit in, as well as the difference you can make to their life
- There are lots of demands to juggle – many foster children attend appointments with specialists as well as contact with birth families, and adoptive families
- There will be two sets of regulations to take into account, and two different local authority departments, but social workers will be available to provide extra support
- Being approved as a foster carer may take months, including training, assessment, and going before a panel

For more information on the process, try The Fostering Network: www.fostering.net