

When there's no else to turn to...

As Foster Care Fortnight launches this week, Best meets three foster mums who welcome Britain's most vulnerable children into their families

'IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY BUT IT'S ALWAYS REWARDING'

Carol Sloan, 53, from Huddersfield, has fostered seven children.

I saw the importance of foster families when I was at school. A good friend had been placed into care and I remember her telling me how special she felt when one family made the effort to get to know her.

I worked in a school with children who had difficult home lives and that showed me they could improve.

So when my three girls were grown up and we had spare bedrooms, me and my husband, Peter, 58, decided to apply.

In the past five years, we've had various placements and I've loved them all. It hasn't always been easy. We fostered two sisters, aged seven and eight, who had both suffered terrible abuse.

Over the 15 months the girls lived with us, they confided in us. I wanted to take them on long-term but they were placed with different families. I was heartbroken they'd been separated. I felt like someone was taking my own children away.

But usually, seeing the children move on is a great thing. We've had children to be adopted by other family

members, which is lovely.

Currently, we've two sisters living with us and they're a real part of our family. They call us 'Mum' and 'Dad', and our birth daughters see them as sisters. We recently renewed our vows and they were our bridesmaids - along with another girl we had on a short-term placement.

We took them to Gambia with us, where we go to do charity work. When they saw the horrific situations some kids live in there, one of the foster girls said, 'I can't believe how lucky I am.' But knowing how awful her own upbringing was, I was so proud of her.

Fostering isn't a job in the usual sense. It's tough, it's constant, it's emotional - but it's one of the most rewarding things you can do.

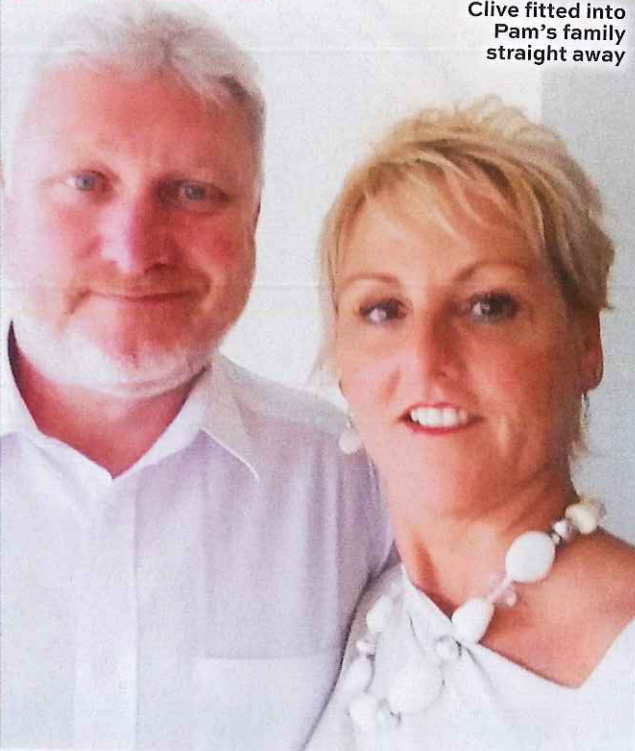
Carol and Peter have been fostering for five years



TACT
(The Adolescent and Children's Trust) is the UK's largest fostering and adoption charity. Everything the charity does is for children in care and on the fringes of care. TACT urgently needs more foster carers from all backgrounds, cultures and religions, whether married, single, or living with a partner, and is particularly interested in hearing from people who are able to care for teenagers and sibling groups. Visit tactcare.org.uk, or call 0330 123 2250.

'SEEING THE CHILDREN IMPROVE MAKES EVERY MOMENT WORTHWHILE'

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Clive fitted into Pam's family straight away

Pam Jones, 50, from Neath, has taken in four children.

I've been a foster carer for 10 years and I wouldn't change a minute of it. Yes, there have been challenging times. The first girl who was given to us had a terrible background and was extremely violent.

After more than four years with us, she attacked me so badly, I ended up in hospital and we had to end her placement. But even that, I class as a positive experience. Other families had only managed to cope with her for four months, and despite how it ended, I'd still seen massive improvements in her. I keep in touch with her now and she's turned into a lovely young lady.

Since then, we've had another two placements. The second were siblings, one who had fetal alcohol syndrome. They were adopted together after a year.

Then in 2012, we got another girl. But the following year, I split with my husband. I seriously considered giving up.

But it was something I'd wanted to do since I was a classroom assistant, so I decided to continue.

It hasn't always been easy, but I'm so pleased I did it. It wouldn't have done the girl any good to go back to placements after we'd bonded and she also gave me something to focus on. I call her 'my little girl' and we're as close as mother and daughter.

I wasn't looking for love, so I never considered how a man might adapt to our family, but when I met Clive Manchipp last year, he fitted into our situation straight away.

Fostering brings so much love into a family. It benefits everyone, not just the kids.

'WE LOVE THEM AS IF THEY'RE OUR OWN CHILDREN'

Gemma Ross, 36, from Skewen, South Wales, has two long-term foster sons. My partner of eight years, Jeremy Edwards, and I had always wanted children but it didn't happen for us. We didn't want to go through IVF, so we started to think about adoption and fostering.

I was a support worker for the NHS for 10 years and saw first-hand how children thrived in foster care. I was in awe of what such parents did – and Jeremy agreed.

We applied through TACT (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) and, after various in-depth interviews and an intensive three-day course, we were successful, and in July 2014, we had our first placement – a 15-year-old boy.

When he arrived, we had an open and honest talk, setting ground rules, but also stressing the fact there was room for negotiation and that we'd always be there for him.

Lots of people said they thought it would be weird to start sharing your house with a complete stranger, but for us, it felt natural.

So when we were offered another 14-year-old boy, in September 2014, while our first was still with us, we accepted him, too.

We love them as if they were our own children. One of the boys has contact with his mum, and we have a relationship with her, too – we work together for what's best for him.

We talk about the future, and when the boys do leave, we'd love to foster more.



Fostering feels natural to Gemma and Jeremy