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Carers on the joy of fostering

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A young same-sex couple have described the positive impact fostering has had on their lives in a bid to inspire others to do the same.

Natalie and Terri fostered two sisters, aged four months and 11 years, to keep them from being separated in the care system.

The married couple, from Bromley, said they couldn't be happier with their experience and want to encourage others to consider fostering vulnerable children.

"We could not have known what a positive and profound impact the children would have on us and our wider family. It has been a whirlwind of a year, but the outcome has been incredible.

"We were very motivated by the idea of giving a home to children who end up in the care system, and we felt it would be especially great if we could help prevent siblings being separated."

"After a rocky start, the sisters settled into their new home and began to thrive.

"After some time, we began to see the positive change in their physical and mental health and development. Establishing and growing the relationships that we have with both children has been an incredible journey.

Natalie and Terri fostered the children through TACT, the UK's largest fostering and adoption charity.

They are keen to encourage others to follow in their footsteps and take on the role of foster carer, but said it was "natural" to feel worried at

first. They said: "When children first arrive, your world will turn upside down. This does eventually settle down with routines and most importantly, you start to form relationships with these young, vulnerable children.

"Ensure that they see you as their voice and advocate. Make them a part of your family for however long their time with you will be. They too have a right to live in a caring and nurturing home."

Dave has been caring for children since 1972 and currently cares for a teenage girl with learning difficulties. He started fostering with his wife but has continued as a single carer after she passed away in 2012. He said: "Fostering as a single man is not something I ever envisaged or thought about. To be honest, after when my wife died I didn't think I would be able to carry on fostering. Social workers from Southwark council spoke to the children, and I was glad to hear they both adamantly wanted to stay with me. I'm glad I have been able to finish what my wife and I started.

"As many people say, fostering is a vocation not a job, and it's with good reason. Fostering is not a nine-to-five job. The best thing about fostering is seeing a child grow in confidence and leave care full of self esteem and making a go of life.

"To anyone thinking of fostering, I say go for it. Your life will be enriched and you will be helping someone who really needs it. Yes, it's hard at first but you get oodles of training and lots of support."

Debbie and Paul have been fostering since 2015 and currently have been caring for a

teenage boy.

Debbie said: "I wanted to become a foster carer and especially a foster carer for Southwark council because it's where I live and I think it is important Southwark people foster Southwark children.

"We found ourselves in a situation where our youngest went away to university and we were rattling around a three bedroom flat and it's a joy to have youngsters coming into the home. It's something that we both wish we had done sooner.

"We're looking after a teenager at the moment I think there can be a lot of sensationalised stories about caring for older children. With teenagers you still have to be there and parent but they also like to have their own time. He's part of our family and other foster children that we've had look up to him for advice.

"You only ever hear about the 'impossible teenagers' and that's not the case for everyone. You don't hear about the good things."

Stella has been fostering for 18 years and has looked after more than 60 children. She said: "I always say, fostering is not just a young person or a child coming into your home and you providing a roof and a safe environment, it's about love.

"If you woke me up in the middle of the night and asked me about the children I've cared for, over sixty children, I can tell you each one's date of birth, but ask me what I had for breakfast and I can't remember."

For more information on fostering through TACT, visit tactcare.org.uk

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Clockwise from left, foster carers Debra and Paul, Stella, Natalie and Terri and Dave