

GOOD NEWS STORY

With Christmas just around the corner, I wanted to shine the light on the importance of family contact for this edition of the Good News Story and how, when all the adults in a child's world have a good relationship that is based on mutual respect, understanding and empathy, the flow-on effect to the child can never be underestimated.

The lead up to Christmas can be a very stressful and conflictual time for many families as we face the challenges of having to be in a million places at once and, of course, the financial burden that this time of year can often bring. Christmas should however, also be a time that brings us joy, one where we can spend time with the ones we love and care for and with children in care it is our responsibility to ensure that this is achieved wherever possible, in a way that is considerate of the child's needs.



Jenny and Mark have been carers for 35 years and their dedication in supporting any child they have cared for to be connected to their family is unwavering. Jenny and Mark have dedicated their life to fostering, having adopted two children and provided long-term care to four children who are now adults –and they are still not done having committed to the long term care of two brothers aged 16 and 12 whom they have cared for the past 11 years.

I recently had the pleasure of spending time with Jenny and Mark and listening to their stories of joy and of course the trials and tribulations that any fostering journey would bring. Entering into their home, straight away you are struck with a sense of homeliness, the walls are covered with family photos and when you consider how many children they have cared for over the years and how many of these children have now grown up to be parents themselves you start to get a picture of how many photos there are! In fact there was even one portrait of a dog proudly displayed on a wall surrounded by smiling faces of children. Why, you ask? Because one of their adult children considered their dog to be their baby and therefore insisted this portrait be displayed alongside all the other grandchildren and so it was.

The photos are evidence of the importance these carers place on family. As I started talking more to Jenny and Mark about why and how they place so much importance on family, it soon became very clear. Mark and Jenny initially thought they were unable to have children of their own, hence their journey into the fostering world began. After they adopted their first child, they were blessed with a biological child of their own, something they did not think was possible. Jenny and Mark were not done by a long shot though, they were put on this earth to care for children and that they did, all the time ensuring that whoever came into their care had the opportunity to be connected to family, something that Jenny would always try to ensure was done in the most natural and child focused way possible and if this meant Jenny facilitating contact, she would. The reason both carers place so much importance on family contact, is because of their core belief that children need to know who they are, something that can only be achieved to its fullest potential when they are connected to family.

During most of Jenny's 40 year marriage to Mark, she was aware that Mark was adopted as a child, information that Mark was not aware of. Mark eventually found out about his adoption after his parents passed away and sought out his birth mother who he was able to connect to. Unfortunately whilst Mark has met his birth mother he has been unable to meet his two half siblings as his birth mother has requested this not occur. To this day his half siblings do not know of his existence. It is clear that Mark's own story has impacted both Jenny and Mark in the way they view the importance of family connectedness and whilst Mark may not ever get to meet his siblings, he is certainly surrounded by a very large and connected family and makes it his business to ensure that those who come into their family know where they are from.

To understand how this foster family values birth families, you only need to look at the relationship they share with the birth parents of the brothers they have cared for over the past 11 years. Jenny shared with me that she has always

had a positive relationship with the boy's parents and whilst there has been times of absences from the parents over the years, Jenny was able to understand underlying factors. Jenny spoke of a time when the boy's mother had another child and completely disengaged from the boys and Child Safety, however rather than seeing this instantly in a negative light, Jenny shared that she understood mum's fear of having this child removed from her care during this time. Jenny shared that it was important not to judge the mother or be negative about her around the boys. Jenny was happy to share that the child remained in the mother's care and she too now makes up part of the boy's family, joining in for visits.

Jenny facilitates contact visits between the parents and the boys. These visits occur in a manner that is natural, focused on the family as a whole and where Jenny ensures she does not place additional pressures on the family that could create stress i.e. if they are all going to meet at McDonalds, she would pay and if it is a contact visit around Christmas time, the focus of the visit would not be presents, but rather coming together. Jenny stated she is very much guided by the boys as they get older and whilst contact is set for certain times of the year, if the boys would like more visits Jenny is happy to arrange for these.

Jenny and Mark have also facilitated contact between the boys and extended family members who live interstate. They place great importance on children and young people having as many people in their world of significance to them as possible. This has meant that the children have been able to meet their maternal grandparents, great maternal aunty, their paternal grandfather and great paternal uncle. Once again all of these visits were organised and facilitated by the carers in natural settings.

Jenny spoke about having a relationship of mutual respect with the family, they are only too aware of the love the parents have for their boys and respect wholeheartedly that they will always be their parents. It is because of this mutual respect that Jenny and Mark believe they can say there has never been any issues with contact. I asked Jenny to speak with the boys and ask them about how they view their contact with their parents. The 16 year old boy described Jenny and Mark's relationship with his parents as 'good' and said that they always organise 'catch-up' with our parents. He went on to say that contact over the years has been good. The 11 year old said that Jenny and Mark are nice to his parents and that he gets to play with his sister and sometimes he even gets presents. I think for a teenage boy to describe a relationship and contact as good is an amazing effort!

I have recently been listening to a Podcast from a now adult (Rosie Waterland) who has written about her life, one that has been filled with trauma. The Podcast reflects on the chapters of her book as she speaks of her parents

struggles with alcoholism and mental health. Rosie is a brilliant writer – she has the ability to put into words the feelings she experienced during her childhood – one analogy that really stood out for me was her description of the feelings she had when things were bad, Rosie called them her 'toxic butterflies'. Toxic butterflies were an emotion that would become physical because of the very nature of what she was trying to contend with at any given time as a child, often with no one to support her. The reason I write about this is because many children in care would experience similar feelings, these toxic butterflies can create physical reactions for children around anything they may see as a threat, however these toxic butterflies can also come out when a child senses conflict and if that conflict is between two people the child cares deeply about, these toxic butterflies have the potential to cause further harm to a child.



Children need to see adults in their world communicating well and being respectful to each other – when this happens children get to be children, they are not forced into a world of divided loyalty where toxic butterflies will start to shade every interaction they have with those they care about most deeply. Jenny and Mark accept that the boys' parents are not always going to be dependable, that there will be times where they let the children down, they are realistic about the challenges they face daily and point out that the boys are in care for a reason. We need to expect that parents are not going to meet our expectations or the expectations of the Child Protection system all the time, they may not even meet the expectations of their children. However our role is to ensure that all children in care know who they are and we must support them through the times where toxic butterflies come to the surface, but these toxic butterflies should never surface because a child views a toxic relationship between their carers and parents.



It must also be acknowledged that positive relationships with family cannot always be achieved through no fault of carers – sometimes parents and birth families are just not ready to interact with anyone who they view as part of the Child Protection system. What is important in these instances is that any child in your care is witness to positive attempts at communication and they are not witness to negative talk about their family.

I want to thank Jenny and Mark for allowing me into their home and sharing their story with me. As a couple they have made such a difference to the life's of so many, not just the children they have provided loving and accepting homes to, but all those family members they accepted and respected over their 35 years of caring.

I would like to leave you with food for thought. Having worked in the Child Protection sector now for 17 years, I am an old hand at the language we are all use in this space and I don't think twice about the impact that my words can have on children who are the very reason I come to work every day. That was until I attended the Lady Cilento

Children's hospital Symposium recently and listened to a panel comprising of Young People who have exited care and Youth Workers. The Youth worker spoke about how the language we choose to use can have a huge impact on how our children and young people view their world. She gave the example that as a Youth Worker she will never say to any child or young person that it is time for 'family contact', she said this is not something she would say to her own children so why would she use that terminology for children with a care experience. Put simply she said if we are going to see grandma, I will say we are off to grandmas – not we are off to family contact. This really struck a chord with me as I had never considered that the language we have come accustomed to in the sector is our language, not the child's and the very use of the words family contact already begins to take away the natural feeling that seeing family should bring. So I put a challenge to you – next time you are supporting a child to get ready to see their family members – use the language any family would use.

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