CAROL'S STORY – CARING FOR DISABLED RYAN WAS AN EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

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National Fostering Agency (NFA) foster carer Carol represents a shining example of the monumental effort and selfless dedication towards improving the lives of children and young people our foster carers are renowned for throughout the UK.

Fostering led to adoption after survival against all odds

Having fostered vulnerable children and young people on a short-term and respite basis for almost eight years, Carol describes how an initial short-term foster placement quickly turned into a life changing decision on whether to adopt.

> *"Ryan came to us when he was a baby. He has Down's syndrome, as well as other health issues such as reduced heart function and chronic lung disease.*
>
> *"At first I thought, 'Oh my gosh, there is no way I can meet his specific needs'.*
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> *"I then went to meet him in the hospital and I just fell in love! I also thought that if I don't decide to foster him, then who will?*
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> *"Nobody knew what his future was at this stage, but we did know that he couldn't go to his birth parents' home, as the judge in charge of Ryan's case said it wasn't possible."*

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Nervous hospital wait and realisation Ryan had become an integral part of the family

> *"After being his foster parents for a couple of months, Ryan then became really poorly to the point where we thought we'd lost him. We were rushed into the general infirmary where the person operating on him told us that he may not come out of theatre as his lungs had collapsed.*
>
> *"I burst out crying and rang my husband to say 'If he comes out of theatre, we're adopting him!'. It was as simple as that, as we realised how horrible it would be to lose him in any sense as he had become such a huge part of our lives by this point.*
>
> *"Once we had the all clear that everything was fine with Ryan, I rang the social worker and asked if we could get the ball rolling for adoption. My family and the social worker were all thrilled to bits with the news.*
>
> *"We then went through the adoption process including going to panel and adopting him. On his official adoption day, he got to sit in the judge's chair and even took his wig off, which would usually be a criminal offence!"*

The importance of a close-knit family support network

There are many different **types of foster care**. As many of our foster carers will describe, being able to care for a child who may otherwise not have the life opportunities they deserve can be incredibly rewarding. These carers make sure everyone benefits by taking advantage of our **specialist foster carer training courses**, so they can look after children with more complex needs.

Whether someone is fostering or adopting a child, one of the overriding reasons that they are able to enjoy a happy and healthy upbringing often centres around a foster family having a consistent support network to help out when required.

Carol went on to explain how pivotal her immediate family have been throughout her time as a foster carer, with a looked-after five month old baby girl and a fostered 16-year-old teenager also currently part of the household alongside Ryan.

> *"I would be absolutely lost without them. They're great with all the foster kids we currently have and have had in the past. With Ryan, they treat him just like a younger brother. At weekends my daughter Emma and her husband will often take him out and he's fully part of our extended family's lives too.*
>
> *"It sounds daft but I do feel that he came to us for a reason and that it was meant to be. It is hard work at times and I am lucky that I have family that can do a lot for me otherwise it would be really difficult. But the main thing is that I could not imagine life without him, and that's what it's all about."*

Going from strength to strength

Ryan, now aged seven, has gone on to thrive under the care of Carol and her family. Defying initial medical opinion that he wouldn't be able to walk, he is now able to move around the house predominantly unaided, and attends mainstream education with the help of one-to-one support.

> *"He's doing really well for somebody with the health problems that he has.*
>
> *"His school are really helpful and understanding about his health. If there is a bug going around school, they will ring us up to let us know what's happening. Just last week there was a chicken pox outbreak going around school. If there is something particularly nasty like that and all his classmates have it then it can be best for his health to keep him at home.*
>
> *"Every time we go and visit the consultant, who has known him from birth, she comments on how different he looks and they all get really excited that he's getting on so positively.*
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> *"Ryan also has a birth sister that has been adopted by a lovely family down south who said that they would like to stay in touch, as they don't have to. We have been able to send school photos as well as birthday and Christmas cards. We have her picture on the wall here and we explain that it's his sister and say goodnight to her each night."*

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