



# Fostering is amazing — you get to support a child and help them be the best they can be

Seasoned foster parents Suzy and Christina Brennan-Seery tell *Liadán Hynes* why fostering was the right choice for them, the difference it has made in their lives and in the lives of the children they care for, and their advice for prospective foster parents

**S**uzy, 46, and Christina, 37, have been foster carers to seven children in total. Both Cub Scout leaders, they knew that for various reasons they would not be able to have children of their own. Christina, who suffers from Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, says “I wouldn’t want to pass it on.”

“And I was a bit older, and I wasn’t willing to do it,” her wife Suzy adds with a laugh.

Christina had retired from her work as a veterinary nurse because of her condition, so was at home 24/7, available to look after children, when she began to look into foster care. “I’d read a lot of books in general about fostering. I always found the stories very interesting. I kind of thought that could be something we could do. That was how it started. We had a discussion, and we said, ‘yeah, sure, we’ll give it a go.’”

Having got in touch with Orchard Fostering in 2017, they began the process of getting clearance to become foster carers.

“There was an initial house visit in May 2017,” Christina explains. “We found out then that they wanted to proceed with the full application to become foster carers. You’re assigned an assessing social worker, and you work with them for as long as it takes.”

The process, which they describe as “very in depth”, took six months.

“When you’re working through the assessment stage, if you need to take a breather, or a step back to consider your situation, they allow you the time to do that. You are allowed to take stock,” Suzy says, adding: “there were some things that came up for me, that I had to work through, that were personal from my past, to make sure that this is what we wanted to do.”

“Everything gets brought up from your past,” Christina adds. “You have to do an assessment on your own parents’ parenting style.”

“You learn a lot about yourself, and you learn a lot about your relationships. It was a process that we both enjoyed,” Suzy explains.

Eventually they were approved for placements. “The first was within a week of us being approved,” Christina recalls. “We got a phone call saying that there were two boys, would we be happy to take them.”

Before a new child or children arrive, foster carers do not get much information on their situation beyond name, age, school, religions and cultural needs.

“Food is a very, very good ice breaker,” Suzy agrees, of putting children at their ease. “You start off with food, and then it’s activities after that. We joined them up to a boxing gym, that helped them then cope with their whole situation.”

## Establishing routines

“Routine is one of the most important things — it is for any child — but especially for traumatised children, they absolutely thrive off routine. And if you deviate off routine at all, that can upset things,” Christina explains.

“Regardless of where a child has come from, the fact that they have been put in care, that creates trauma in itself. So they’re all traumatised, if that makes sense,” Suzy adds.

They only had the two brothers for a fortnight. A year later, they received a message from the older boy saying how much he missed them and thanking them for everything they did for them in that time: “The older lad who was doing his Junior Cert, we went and got him the exam paper books, and sat down with him and helped him.”

It’s little things, Suzy explains: “We’re not re-inventing the wheel. We make little changes, to try to support any child that’s in our care.”

Christina adds, “it’s a privilege for us to be able to look after these children.”

They are currently looking after a preteen girl who has been with them for six years, who they have a wonderful relationship with.

Their fostering agency, Orchard fostering, has a social worker on call 24/7, which both

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women describe as helpful; “you’re never alone. That has been invaluable.”

Jennifer Sinnott is the Managing Director of Orchard fostering. “Orchard fostering are contracted by Tusla to recruit and support foster carers throughout the country. Orchard Fostering foster carers receive the weekly national fostering allowance, as well as training and other supports from us such as a dedicated link social worker, availability to 24/7 on call social work service 365 days a year, regular support groups and in person fostering community events, access to our therapeutic services such as systemic psychotherapy, trauma informed psychotherapy, occupation therapy, play therapy, and a large social care support team.”

“There are a number of independent foster care agencies contracted by Tusla to recruit and support foster carers in what is a very challenging time for foster care — this is borne out by the statistics of just 3,866 foster carers currently opening their homes to 5,067\* children.” (\*Figures are correct for end Q2 2023 and figures do not include unaccompanied minors / separated children seeking international protection.)

Jennifer describes the most important qualities a foster carer needs. “A patient and caring nature, as well as a high degree of empathy and resilience. Individuals also need to have the time, energy and motivation to make a positive impact on the lives of these children and young people who really need it. Foster parents are from all walks of life, and we welcome all individuals to consider fostering, regardless of religion, race, sexual orientation, marital status, and importantly, no upper age limit to foster either.”

Naturally, foster carers get attached to the children in their care. What is it like when they move on.

“Heartbreaking,” Suzy says swiftly. “Every time a child leaves you, they leave with a little bit of you. And we hope that they will always remember the good time that they had with us. We want to create a safe, fun environment. We sit around the table in the evening having chats over dinner, find out how everyone’s day has gone. What activities we’re going to do. To try and help them see that they are valued. That somebody actually cares.”

“We all deal with loss all the time anyway,” Suzy continues. “So you deal with it nearly



**The Brennan-Seerys are now caring for a one-year-old child.** Photo: Mark Condren

like you do any other loss that you would go through. You’ve had a child in your life. The child leaves. You may or may not have contact with that child. But we have a good sense that we have done our best for the child when they are with us.”

Living in the present is key with navigating being a foster carer. “There’s no point in living in the past, because you can’t change that,” Christina says. “And we don’t dwell on the future,” Suzy adds.

“We make plans, but they’re always fluid. Nothing’s set in stone,” Christina explains. “Nothing for any of us is set in stone,” Suzy says.

Typically, after a child leaves, they take a break before the next replacement, for some recovery time, to process their own emotions. “Because you go through a grieving process,” Christina says.

As a couple, they are entirely “on the same page. We’re mind readers,” Christina laughs. “We’re so solid. We know that if we’ve gotten through everything that we’ve gotten through, there’s nothing going to get between us.”

To be foster carers, “you need to be honest and open with each other. Parenting is hard. Parenting traumatised children is harder.”

### Opening up

It can take a long time for a child to get comfortable with foster carers. Initially, there will be what is referred to as the honeymoon period. “Everything is great, and the children can do everything they’re told. They’re scared, because they don’t know what will happen next,” Suzy explains. “Once they’ve settled, then the behaviours can show. And that can take anything from six weeks to six months. Because they have to feel safe before they’ll open up. And they know that you’re going to be there for them regardless of what happens.”

Sticking to a routine is key to helping a child to feel safe. “Letting them know in advance what’s happening. Plan everything and really stick to the plan. Listening to their concerns in relation to if we’re going somewhere. What are they worried about?” Suzy says.

I ask them to describe the qualities they think make a person suitable for this role, and they list off calmness, patience, love, an open mind, being accepting and non-judgmental. “And willing to support regardless of what’s going to come in. If they have room at their table, room in their heart, a spare room, and are willing to learn about themselves,” Suzy says. “It’s a constant learning curve.”

As well as their preteen, they currently have a baby girl. She will be one year old the week after we speak, Suzy and Christina picked her up from hospital when she was two and a half weeks old. Throughout our conversation, her happy squeals and squeaks can be heard in the background. The two women lovingly reply to her.

“She was only four pounds in weight, because she was seven weeks early. She’ll be one next week. We do refer to ourselves as mammy around her. She was a tiny little puppet,” Suzy says.

You get the sense of two people who find great meaning in what they are doing. “We get to make a difference,” Suzy explains. “We get to support a vulnerable person through the roughest parts of their life. And help them to be the best that they can be. Fostering is amazing to do — though it may not be for everyone.”

“It’s not for everyone,” Christina says. On coming into a child’s life, and assuming a parental role without being their actual parent, she explains: “It’s more difficult for the child than it is for us. We’re OK with it. We know that we’ve a job to do. But I often find the children find it hard to know what way should they refer to us. We obviously say to them, ‘you have a mammy, we’re Christina and Suzy.’”

It’s important, Suzy adds, that the children know where they come from. “And we’re not a replacement. We’re an addition. We may be in the role of a parent, but they still know that they have their biological parents. We’re substitute mummies.”

*If you are interested in fostering or would like to know more about fostering, please contact Orchard Fostering on [www.orchardfostering.ie](http://www.orchardfostering.ie), [info@orchardfostering.ie](mailto:info@orchardfostering.ie), or tel 01 6275713*

## In an online world, few things are more beneficial than small human gestures of connection

Calling a friend or family member, greeting people in the local supermarket and taking time for in-person interactions are just a few of the ways we can enhance our wellbeing, writes *Stephanie Regan*

There was a time when community and human connection were knitted inextricably into our daily lives. It might have been chatting at the office, on the bus or train, or as we bought a coffee, or waited for others, at the bank, the church or supermarket.

The shift to remote working and online everything has divested us of many simple opportunities to chat, greet and connect. It’s a pity, not least because these interactions are good for us, for our wellbeing and our health.

### Restoring communication habits

In fact, there is a discomfort in people now when it comes to making calls, having a chat, approaching a stranger, that frankly was not there before. Is it a lockdown effect? Well, yes, for those who were teenagers at the time, but for others it’s just simply that they’ve gotten out of the habit.

We are a nation of great talkers and we need to protect this very precious spontaneous aspect of ourselves.

You may say, it’s a new world and does it really matter? Actually, it does matter because our wellbeing is directly linked to the diversity of our social portfolio — the richness and evenness of our relationship types.

And while it’s easy to rely on a small few family relationships, it’s not always wise and it’s not the only way. If you are fortunate enough to have family and loved ones, on whom you can rely for support, fun and joy, then count your good fortune, because not everyone does. These relationships, instead of being loving and nourishing, can be a source of high stress, laced with duty and demand.

It’s important to look at all social connection points and to build a diverse social map, with many varied relationships, big and small and not to underestimate the importance of any of them.

As well as family and close friends, there may also be other interesting social acquaintances at work, in sport, or with a

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group with whom you share a hobby. Think of it like scaffolding: the more contacts and connections you have, the steadier the structure, and the less likelihood there is for destabilisation, if or when a connection comes apart — metaphorically speaking.

Thus after a breakup, divorce or bereavement, the more roles that you have in life to which you can switch your attention and energy, the more resilient you are from the impact of the life change.

A recent study in the *Journal of Personality and Psychology* looked more deeply into the value and dynamics of the smaller social connections in life — the phone call to a friend or family member, the chat with a stranger.

In this study, it was found that these small social connections had a greater value than had previously been thought. In particular, the receiver of the social gesture reported greater appreciation than anticipated and this was considerably higher, when the gesture, be it a greeting, a chat or a phone call, was unexpected.

Researchers also found that people had many reasons for holding back — not wanting to intrude or feeling that the social gesture may not be received well. In fact, the opposite was always the case.

### Reaching out

So give some thought to reaching out, greeting, saying hello to that person, or making that phone call that you have been intending to make. In this context, it’s worth noting that an eight-minute phone call was found to be as uplifting as meeting in person, in terms of the wellbeing effect.

In the case of an old friend or loved one, it’s easy to see how connecting again could be a nourishing, enjoyable experience, chatting about old times, catching up.

But the study showed strong benefits to wellbeing even when the connection was with a stranger. So what exactly is happening and why are these small connections good for us?

At a micro level, it breaks the cocoon of your own world and internal thoughts that can be on a loop — offering a natural break for the mind. It connects you with another in a mini bond, which makes you feel less alone, and can expand your horizon as you listen to someone else, someone new, their story and experience.

When we are noticed, chatted to, greeted, or when we are remembered, it makes us feel valued, that our presence has meaning, and serves our need to have our existence witnessed by another. In essence, it counteracts the emotional and psychological ravages of loneliness.

So consider reaching out to that friend or family member that is well due a call.

Remember that small talk has big benefits, and consider talking to someone you don’t know today. It will make their day, and now you know why.

Finally, the social gesture, however small, is good for everyone. Create the chats and don’t hold back. We are hardwired for social connection, which is why we must not let this gift of Irish life slip away from us.

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