"If you love someone, let him go"

"I don't find it fair, to raise a child, love him/her, share with him/her a family life and then one day s/he is taken away from you". This is the reaction prospective foster carers, and sometimes approved foster carers, often have to face when they express their wish to foster to close relatives, friends and society in general.

Fostering is about giving a chance to a child to temporarily have a family life. This can help him/her learn new skills, build healthy relationships while keeping contact with the biological family. During the foster placement the biological family addresses certain issues and difficulties which life can present. If the foster carers do not understand the benefits gained by the children in their care and their biological families through fostering, they might perceive fostering as unfair and emotionally tiring.

Giving a chance

When Paul* discovered that his partner was pregnant, he decided to leave since he had a family of his own. This was a shock for Maria and during pregnancy she was lonely and depressed. With no family to support her and all the stigma she had to face, she decided that when the baby is born, she would put it in residential care.

Sandra was born on 2nd March 1999 and Maria voluntarily placed her in residential care on a voluntary basis three days after. Maria used to visit her daughter at the children's home once a week. She managed to build a positive relationship with the nuns and was grateful for all they managed to do with her child.

The social workers involved in the case worked hard with the mother and helped her to understand the benefits her daughter could get if she lives with a foster family which would take care of Sandra and be able to live in a family environment. It was very hard for the mother to come to terms with the concept that her child will live with a family she does not know. She could not accept easily the thought that her child would be living with an outsider, who was neither a family relative or someone she herself knew.

After seriously thinking about her situation and her difficulties, and considering her wish to provide a family environment for her child, Maria understood that if she gives her child a chance for a family life, she would be giving her child the care and attention she could not give her. Although it was heart-breaking for her to see her daughter go, Maria was convinced more than ever that this was the right

choice she could make for her daughter.

The Borg family who had attended training and was approved as a foster family, was waiting for a matching to be made with a child. They accepted that Sandra joins them. At that time, the girl was five years old. The Borg couple had two children of their own, whose ages were fifteen and thirteen.

In the first few weeks when Sandra joined the Borg family, every member of the family was happily doing the utmost to make the child feel welcomed and helped her adjust to her new experience in family life while providing her with everything that she might have missed throughout her first five years in life. In the mean time, Sandra still had contact with her mother once a week.

As time passed and Sandra settled in, another side of her began to emerge. At school she acted out and very often her teacher had to send for her foster carers since her behavior was uncontrollable. She used to pick up on her class mates, throw copybooks at the teacher, say rude words and at times she even attempted to run away from school. A facilitator was also allocated to the girl at school.

During this period, the situation at home was not much better. Sandra's foster carers hardly found time for themselves. However, in spite of the hard time they were facing because of Sandra's behaviour, they moved on, always believing that all they were doing was to give Sandra a chance with the hope that one day she will have a life like other children. The Borgs, always backed and supported by the Appogg Fostering Team, believed that Sandra was craving love and individual attention. They understood that she lacked the ability to control her behaviour and acted the way she did as a result of the lack of attachment she had experienced in the first crucial years, during which every child develops his/her own character.

What Sandra lacked was the recognition of her own feelings. She was so emotionally lacking that it was hard for the child to even find the words to describe her feelings. Sandra needed to work on such issues to control her behaviour and be accepted by her peers. The foster carers recognized this issued and understood what she really needed. Working hand in hand with professionals and involving all members of the family, they shifted their focus on her emotional needs.

The Borgs decided to transfer the child to a new school where Sandra could be helped to identify who she is and where she stands. This new environment helped her develop further the necessary social skills. On the other hand, at home, the foster carers involved the child in different educational play activities such as story telling. These helped Sandra learn to identify new feelings and emotions. The girl was also involved in social activities which gave her the opportunity to increase her self-esteem.

The Borgs understanding of the child and their conviction and perseverance in their cause kept them going. Today they are enjoying the results of their work; one of the rewards they received was when Sandra was chosen to represent her school abroad together with other school mates in a concert.

The foster carers believed in Sandra's abilities and this helped her to grow into a strong teenager with a group of friends who trust her. Sandra was able to have her group of friends, appreciate her strengths and gain new skills such as following rules and respecting other people's opinion even when different from her own, and finally control her emotions even when things do not turn out the way she wished them to.

Hadn't the Borg family believed in their abilities to support and guide Sandra and provide her with a family environment, Sandra would not have gained the experiences she did by living within a family. The Borgs gave Sandra a chance for a family experience that, in spite of not being her biological family, was able to prepare her accordingly and if one day, the opportunity to rejoin her natural mother arises, she would be in a position to do so or alternatively to livean independent life with the continuing support of her foster family.

Different Experiences

Sandra is only one of the many children who benefited through a foster care placement in the past years. She still lives with the Borgs. This is a case of long-term fostering. Other children benefit also from short-term placements and also from respite fostering. In the latter case, children stay with a family for a short, specific period of time in cases of, for example, hospitalisation of parents and respite in weekends amongst others. Foster placements can also be done with relatives (kinship fostering).

The present situation – Be a part of it!

The need for foster carers is continuously present. Agenzija Appogg within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services is constantly recruiting new families who feel such a vocation in order to share their family life with those who are in need of it and regularly organizes training for those interested.

Agenzija Appogg has a professional team of social workers who can guide, prepare, teach and empower prospective and approved foster carers both before and throughout the placement. Working in a team is always the basis for a successive foster placement.

All those who are interested in learning more about what fostering entails are encouraged to contact Agenzija Appogg on 2295 9000 or and speak to a social worker who can guide them in the fostering

process according to one's own family life. More information can also be obtained from www.appogg.gov.mt.

* Names and dates were changed to protect identity of minor.

Erica Mangion
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Agenzija Appogg forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which also incorporates Agenzija Sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.mt) and Agenzija Sapport (www.sapport.gov.mt).