HOME *away from* HOME

Ever considered being a foster carer? What's stopping you? Three families share their stories with **BLANCHE CLARK** of how they are changing children's lives



Special family: Natasha Erbs and Andrew Brain hope being foster carers will help their own children, Jack and Matilda, learn to look out for others.

PICTURE NICOLE CLEARY

THE African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" resonates with many Australians. It's an idea that some put into action, opening their hearts and doors to our community's most vulnerable children.

Being a foster carer comes with many challenges, but those who do it often smile broadly or tear up when they speak of the difference it makes to their lives and that of the children they take in.

Their neighbours and friends often express their own desire to become a foster carer, but worry they don't have time or space.

There's also the fear of the unknown: who will be walking through the door?

The result is there aren't enough foster carers in Victoria. Of the 8188 children in out-of-home care at last count, there were only 2000 active foster carers.

The Department of Health and Human Services estimates it requires 3000 additional foster carers for respite, emergency, short-term and long-term care.

"People are always sensibly worried about overcommitting," says Deb Tsorbaris, CEO at the Centre For Excellence in Child and Family Welfare.

"But you can specify just how much time you have available and that commitment might grow over time because you develop this great bond with this child."

There are 26 foster care agencies in Victoria and a new website, Fostering Connections, is making it easier for people to find which agency is right for them.

It takes about six months to get accreditation, including 18 hours of training and assessments.

Tsorbaris says foster carers say simple things such as taking a child to the footy can make a big difference.

"It is an amalgam of lots of little things that make up a fantastic experience for both the carer and child."

FAMILY

NATASHA Erbs, 42, and Andrew Brain, 49, wanted their two children to grow up learning to look out for others.

"We've got everything we need financially and we can give our kids everything, but I don't want them to grow up thinking every kid gets that," Erbs says.

The couple decided to become foster carers two years ago when Erbs stopped working fulltime and they set up a specialist design consultancy business together. They also waited until their children, Jack, 10 and Matilda, 7, were in primary school.

They say the compulsory training for applicants ensured they were adequately prepared for the role.

"They get right into your head to figure out what's your motivation, reasoning, and are you fair dinkum?" Brain says.

The couple were accredited in 2014. They have since looked after 10 children, including two sets of siblings. They don't take children older than their own children.

Erbs says she was nervous when they got their first call.

"We got this beautiful little toddler," she says. "She was with us for a week and a half and her grandmother came down to take custody because her daughter had placed herself into a psych facility. And I was like, 'Oh, that was really positive'."

She says some of the emergency care has been harrowing, and they have decided to only do that once a month.

"Sometimes they will call you, particularly on a Friday night. In one case they had four children that needed to be placed and we got the two youngest at 10pm on a Friday night, bawling, the little girl was in the car vomiting," Erbs says. "It was traumatic and we just had them for the weekend."

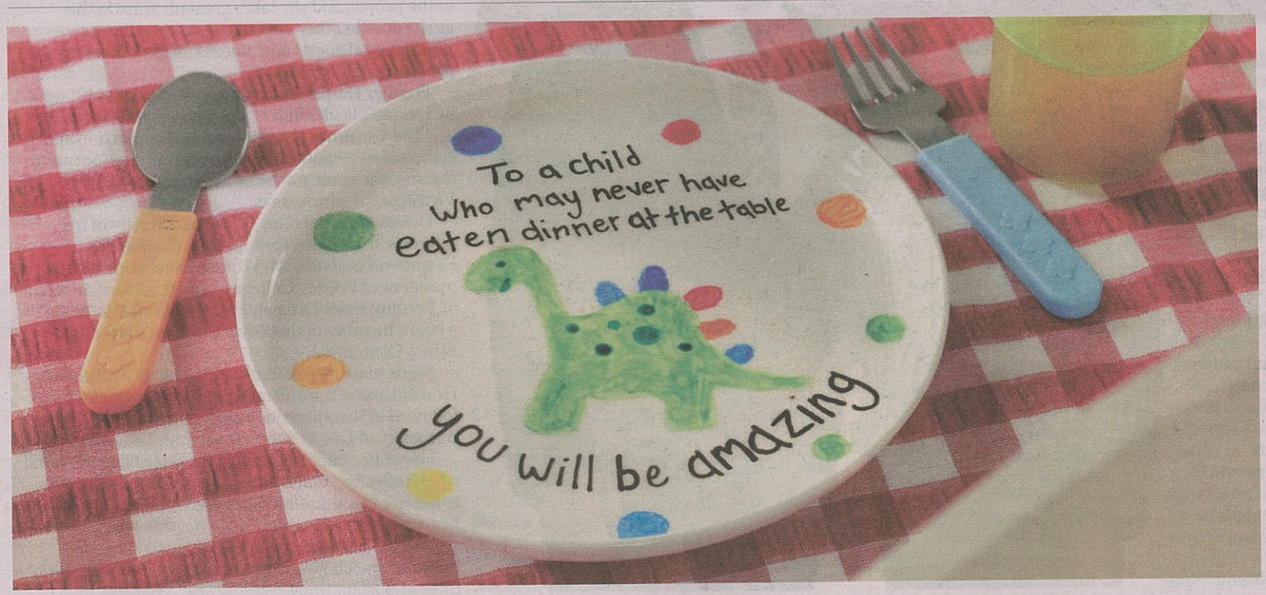
Their great joy is the baby they are now looking after.

"She came to us when she was 4½ weeks old and she's almost 10 months and she's beautiful," Erbs says. "I now have her in child care two days a week that is paid for and I come into work. People don't know that you can get child care."

Erbs says she will find it hard to give up the baby if she goes into permanent care.

"I will cry a lot and probably drink a bottle of wine, but there's a family out there who are going to get the most beautiful, well-adjusted little baby."

It's knowing how simple it is to make a difference to a young person's life that keeps her going.



You can make a child feel special by doing small everyday things like sharing a meal at the dinner table. If you could do something this small, but this amazing and you're interested in relief, weekend or long term foster care, visit fosteringconnections.com.au or call 1800 013 088.

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SINGLE BLOKE

MORTGAGE broker Jason Storace, 45, toyed with the idea of becoming a foster carer for years, but he was worried a single bloke wouldn't be deemed suitable. A friend who worked for the Department of Health and Human Services set him straight.

"She said, 'You'll be fine, they are always looking for people'," Storace says.

The timing was also right for the bachelor, who is still not sure if he wants kids of his own.

"The money was OK, business was going well, the house was here; there was an empty room," he says. "My nephews and nieces were four and seven, and my mate's kids the same sort of thing, so we were going away on trips and camping, and there were kids running around everywhere, so that sort of helped."

He was accredited in 2012. Eight months later he got his first call for emergency care for a 16-year-old girl who was self-harming and unable to live with either of her separated parents.

She stayed seven months and by five months he was dealing with common teenage issues.

"There were a couple of late nights that were a bit stressful. But for the most part she was a pleasure to have around."

He says his dog Rahnuk is the icebreaker.

"One girl who came in, she was only 14, it was just for one night and she was petrified," Storace says. "I'd be petrified. She's been in a police station all day long, not knowing where she is going to be sleeping that night, and then she's brought to a strange man's house.

"Rahnuk goes straight up, she is sitting on the couch, and he plonks his backside on the ground right next to her and waits for a pat. Then it's, 'What's the dog's name?' and away you go."

He has a 10-year-old boy who comes over for the occasional weekend of respite care.

"We hang out and do boy stuff," Storace says. "He likes the motorbike. We went for a short motorbike ride — you have to get permission to do that. I've taken him out to my brother's farm and he plays with the kids there and chases the goats around. Just normal things that would put a smile on a kid's face."

He says his family and case manager support him.

"I had a pretty good childhood, no real dramas. My parents got divorced when I was an early teenager and all that sort of stuff. I just thought it would be nice to be somebody that I needed when I was that age."



Caring team: Jason Storace says his dog Rahnuk is often the ice-breaker with foster kids.

PICTURE REBECCA MICHAEL



Rewarding roles: Sarah Williscroft (left) and Anne Dight have looked after 15 children since becoming carers.

PICTURE CHRIS EASTMAN

SAME-SEX COUPLE

ANNE Dight, 50, and Sarah Williscroft, 45, are the earth mothers of foster care. They found being carers so rewarding they rearranged their lives to take on more children.

Dight quit her job as a kindergarten teacher last year so she can stay at home, while Williscroft works night shift so she can be around during the day to help care for their little brood.

They moved to a four-bedroom house in Bentleigh just before Christmas.

"For us to do foster care significantly well, and to do all long-term, short-term, emergency, someone needs to be at home for that to be successful," Williscroft says.

They realise this approach isn't for everyone, it's just what makes them tick.

Since becoming accredited foster carers in November 2014, they've looked after 15 children. In particular, they have taken in a 12-year-old boy and three-year-old autistic boy indefinitely.

"When the kids first come in, we make them feel secure and safe, before we start targeting any behaviour management or anything like that," Williscroft says.

The couple say flexibility and adaptability are the keys to coping with all the demands.

One of their favourite stories is about an 11-month-old boy, who came to them while his mother, who didn't know she was pregnant until delivery, and her partner had time to work out what to do.

"It gave her time to breathe and in the end they said, 'We can do this, we can have this baby'," Williscroft says.

Williscroft says you have to be prepared to sacrifice and not be resentful about it.

"We had a wedding in New Zealand, unfortunately we couldn't go, too many kids, it was too hard," Dight says.

She says there's still trepidation when a new child is coming to the house for care, but they now ask the agency more questions beforehand.

"We've also got a whole lot better at making it work for us and the children that are already here," Dight says. If the house is full or the dynamics aren't right, they will say no.

They say they are in it for the long haul.

"We love doing this and we are both on the same page. I think we will be doing this for many, many years," Williscroft says.

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT FOSTER CARE

Do you have to deal with the child's real family?
Sometimes. Where possible, children in foster care maintain contact with their biological family. Your agency will ensure you are comfortable and supported with any arrangements.

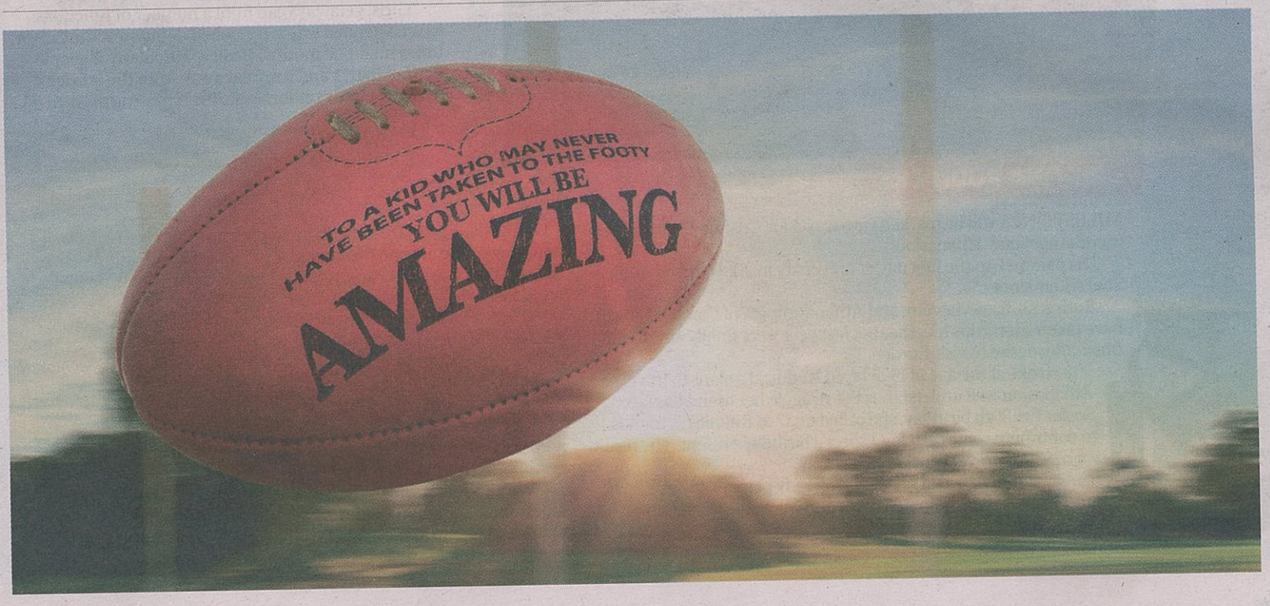
What costs are involved?
As a foster carer you receive a tax-free fortnightly reimbursement to help meet the needs of children in your care. Carers also receive an allowance for the child's medical and education expenses.

What happens if you can't handle the child's behaviour?
As a foster carer you have access to round-the-clock support. Not only is support provided for the child in your care, your agency will work with you to ensure there is training, support and assistance available to manage any complex behaviours.

Are you locked into caring for a child forever?
No. When you become a foster carer, you specify the length and type of care you provide, whether respite for another carer for a weekend, or looking after a child for a few weeks, months or years.

What happens if you bond with the child and want to offer long-term care?
You specify the length and type of care you provide. However, where possible, reunification with the biological family may occur. The needs of each child or young person is different and your agency will ensure you are supported and informed.

What training and accreditation do you need?
All foster carers must complete compulsory accreditation, approximately 18 hours of formal training. The accreditation process is thorough and involves interviews, home visits, police and working with children checks, as well as a medical. The process usually takes four to nine months. Most agencies offer ongoing training opportunities once carers are accredited.



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