

Call Me Dad: Long-Term Foster Parenting

Interview with Ben Hentschke

Tania: *There are around 46,000 children in foster care across Australia, and Ben and his wife Kelly decided to take one of these children into their home.*

Ben: *It's important that it's not about you. You're doing this for the sake of someone else. While it is hard work at times, it's in those small moments. And being able to be there with her through that journey, just fills you with hope when you can see she's secure, loved, and feels valued as well.*

Tania: You're listening to Messages of hope. I'm Tania Nelson and today we'll be talking about foster parenting, particularly what it's like to be a foster parent for the long term. I'm chatting to Ben Henschke who is a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Australia and also a foster parent.

Ben, can you tell us a little about yourself?

Ben: I'm a pastor up in Queensland, and married to Kelly. We've been married for 17 years. And we now have one child and that is Madi, who joined our family just over two years ago, and she's 10 years of age.

Tania: Wow. That would have been a, a big change in your lives. So, tell us how that came about.

Ben: Big is probably a bit of an understatement. Huge change.

We were in the process of looking at adopting a child from overseas. And we were working through the processes that are required for that which are quite extensive, only for a little thing that happened around the world called COVID to come along. Which pretty much put a stop to anyone coming in or out of any country. And so, one of the things that we got encouraged to do was to move down towards the path of foster parenting. And so that was a three year process in itself. That was five years ago now, and then just over two years ago we welcomed Madi into our family.

Tania: Look, I know nothing about foster parenting, so tell us a little bit about the process, what, what did you have to go through?

Ben: So it started with a lot of paperwork. But that wasn't the hard thing. That was pretty easy to fill out. It's just sort of, you go through the ins and outs of, you know, is your place suitable? Where are you as a couple? There was a number of training sessions. Just to get us to understand that children who are coming into foster care are not typical. It's, odd - you have a child born naturally and you just get to walk out of the hospital with them.

Madi was just over seven when she joined us. So, she'd gone through life experiences and so just to equip us as parents as to how to maybe deal with some of that along the way.

Tania: So Ben, what was it like to go from having no child in your family to suddenly having a seven year old?

Ben: I reflect back and go, what was happening?

It was really, really good. So I got three months off work, which was nice, to be able to help Madi adjust into our family, and for me to adjust into being a parent. Because, yeah, they're not dissimilar, I guess, to parents taking paternity leave, when they have their own child. But that allowed time to get used to routines, but all of a sudden I'm putting in school enrolments and organising after care activities and sports and all these things of which I had little to no information and that I just hadn't been involved in just arrived on my doorstep. But you sort of roll a bit with, what's going on, and make it work.

Even getting into the school routine of nine till three. It's like, 'oh, now I do school drop offs and pickups and what does that look like? And where do I have to go?'

I remember the first day we dropped her at her new school. It was like we dropped her off, and I was sort of just hanging at the door and the teacher's like, 'well, are you going to go now?' And I'm like, 'what do you mean?' And she's like, 'The child's here you can go now.' And I was like, 'but it's her first day! She won't know anything or anyone!' And I think that was me not understanding being a parent more than her not understanding being a child because she's pretty good at that.

Tania: And how did Madi adjust to your home? I mean, each home has different values and routines and places importance in different ways. And possibly she'd experienced all sorts of different households. So how did she go?

Ben: I think coming into a new family for the umpteenth time, yeah, it was a big thing for Madi that this was billed for her as her forever home. I don't know, she might've been told that previously as well. So while we had that belief, she took a while for her to understand that. So, there were some challenges that played out behaviourally, emotionally. There was some big breakdowns, a bit of yelling and screaming. I felt a bit sorry for our neighbours on the odd occasion, but it was also part of her testing those boundaries, cause while we might say that, you know, she's part of our family, it wasn't necessarily going to be true for her until she tried to push us away so far that we kept coming back that she started to maybe believe that.

Tania: So, she's trying to understand her security and come to terms with the fact that, yes, she is secure in your family.

Ben: Absolutely, and yeah, maybe a hole in the wall later, and there was forgiveness after that, and we were able to talk it through and move on. I think that was maybe not the turning point, part of that process of her coming to realise that.

Tania: Apart from integrating Madi into your home, what were some of the wider impacts on your life of having this new person in your family?

Ben: So for me, part of my role is going to church on a Sunday. And I think it was the second day she joined us was a Sunday. So we went to church, and she enjoyed herself. As she came out, her comment was, 'Oh, that's the first time I've ever been to church.'

So getting her used to some of those ins and outs of what we would normally do, and used to that. And introducing then her to our friends, to our family so she can build those connections, which over the last couple of years, she's really built some strong connections there.

Tania: So, what has your relationship with your wife been like through this? Have you grown as a couple?

Ben: There's definitely been a lot of conversation between me and my wife, particularly after some of the different emotions and feelings have been displayed. We've realised we've really got to be on the same page, in our parenting, and yeah, working together. So, there's been a lot of, 'oh, Madi's gone to bed, let's just chat about what happened. What did we do well? What did we not?' And part of that's been a growing and learning process for us as well along the way.

Tania: So how's everything now in your household, in your family?

Ben: Look, going pretty great. I'm not going to say it's perfect because I don't think that exists, but it's come a long way. Madi's really integrated. We've just had the last couple of days down in South Australia, catching up with the hometown where I grew up in. And so my parents - Madi's uncles and aunties and cousins, which she absolutely loves. And I think, you know, that's part of that journey for her; building those connections with the extended family. So, she feels more like part of our family because our extended family has become her extended family as well.

Tania: It adds to her sense of security and love and feeling accepted for who she is.

Ben: Absolutely. We also then do a lot of fun things together as a family. Madi and I are both really keen soccer fans. And so, we do a little 10-minute podcast a couple of times a week. We coach her soccer team together with someone else. I'm involved with her scouting journey. So yeah, lots of things that have built that connection and really integrated her into not just the life of our family, but also our community as well.

And, you know, for us it's also about making a difference for her. It's interesting, like over the journey there's been lots of firsts, and I probably didn't realise this at the start but it's been her first sleepover, her first invite to a birthday party that, you know, her parents have said, yes, that she can go to, her first time to go on a roller coaster. And being able to be there with her through that journey just fills you with hope when you can see she's secure, loved, and feels valued as well.

Tania: So, Ben, is there a Bible verse that encourages you in, in your journey as a foster parent?

Ben: Yeah, for me, it's Jeremiah 29: 'For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' And I think that resonates with me because we started down, like I said at the start, the journey of not foster care, but God had a plan. It might not have been necessarily our plan, but it's the one that he has equipped us as we've gone through. We might not have always known all the answers all the time, but we've always known what that next step is, what the future holds. And so that's been part of our journey and very comforting to us.

Tania: So, Ben, you've mentioned that you're a pastor. Has having Madi in your life impacted you as a pastor?

Ben: Absolutely. Huge impact. Aside from the whole routine thing, you know, when I get ready to go to church, I now have to get someone else ready as well to come with me. It's also in reading through some of the promises of God and how we're all called children of God. And even I noticed when I'm sharing the gospel message with people that I'm able to relate differently and I think in a better way because I've got different experiences now, having been a parent, that I didn't have beforehand.

Tania: Have you got any advice to give to others who are contemplating becoming foster parents?

Ben: It's important that it's not about you. You're doing this for the sake of someone else. And also that if you do go down this journey, even if it's for a short time, you're only caring for a child for a month or three months, that you do whatever you can to make that child feel safe and valued and loved. That it's trying to integrate them into your family. Yes, the ultimate goal may be reunification with their biological parents at some point, but for the time that they're with you, do what you can to make them feel like part of your family because they need that care. There's so much evidence of how that ongoing care can impact them and their future long term. So just do what you can to look after them. It's gonna be hard. They'll probably, like Madi did, try and resist it for the first little while. But push through that. Get through that. And just show them that they are secure.

Tania: The Bible speaks quite a bit about us being children of God. Has that concept of being an adopted child of God impacted you now that you're a foster parent?

Ben: Absolutely. And yeah, in a sense, having adopted to some degree, a child of my own, it's that idea of being chosen, and that understanding of what it *means* to be chosen as well. And having someone love you unconditionally, regardless of anything that you have done or haven't done in the past. But that love still remains there - certain, sure, and strong.

Tania: So where's hope found for people who decide to have children but for whatever reason are unable to have children?

Ben: I think it's in being able to make a difference. And while it is hard work at times, it's in those small moments. So, whether it's a smile when I tell another one of my dad jokes - which actually probably came more naturally to me than I thought that it might. I stepped into that part of the parent role really well.

Tania: Excellent.

Ben: Even Madi wanting to hold hands when we walk home from school. It's in those small things that really gives me hope, and also really emphasises that you're doing something, you're making a difference in someone else's life.

And it's also in that support structure around you. One of the great things working with our foster care agency is actually the support that they give. For us, our constant has been our foster care, agency support worker who is there every month, not just checking on how Madi's going, but also importantly, as parents, how are we going? How are we coping, with having a child in care in our life?

And that's where having that family, friend and support network is so important. And that's where it makes it almost easier to integrate a child into your life because then they can have access to all those, friends or cousins or relatives, they're all in that together.

Tania: What can we do to support people like you, Ben, as a foster parent? Is there something that the average person can do to be supportive of the foster parenting system or foster parents?

Ben: I think particularly if you do know people that have foster children to treat them as if they are just children in the same way you would treat any normal child. Don't make it seem good or bad or different. Just embrace them like you would that they were your friend's children. And I think that makes it seem as normal for them in what is probably a very unnormal situation.

Tania: So Ben, does Madi call you dad? And did she do that from day one?

Ben: She does call me dad now. She didn't do it from day one. It was a bit of a process. I remember it being like, it was like a family meeting. She sat us down and said 'okay order of businesses: can I call you Mum and Dad?' Which was very... yeah, it melts your heart. And you're sort of like 'of course you can, sweetheart.' So now it's, Dad or Ben, depending on who's around and what she remembers at the time. And it's interesting cause you overhear her talking with others and she will always refer to 'my dad's over there.' Or the other day she was wearing mum's t shirt, so that was made clear to all her friends that 'this is my mum's shirt.' So, there is those moments that really bring a smile to your face and warm your heart.

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