

Nothing Normal: 33 Years of Foster Parenting

Interview with Tanya

Jo: *Have you ever wondered what it's like to be a foster carer?*

Tanya: *They say it takes a village to raise a child and it's the same in foster care every child that's come into our care, I know we've had a positive impact on, they've had good memories to take away with them. And I can only hold on to the hope that somewhere in there that God's had an impact in their life as well.*

Jo : You're listening to *Messages of hope*. I'm Jo and today I'm speaking with Tanya who has fostered 33 children! Tanya shares about what that's been like and where she's seen hope in the lives of children who come from dark and difficult backgrounds.

So, Tanya, tell us, how did your journey of foster caring begin?

Tanya: It's been quite interesting. So pretty much in 2006, my husband and I were living down in Northaven, and we had a really big home. We were struggling to have kids at the time for health reasons and Shaun was working shift work, so I felt a need to fill a hole of the motherly love in my life. I heard an ad, I think it was on the radio, funnily enough, and it said, 'Why don't you become a foster carer?' So we looked into it. Pretty much 12 years later, we've fostered 33 kids in total.

Initially we went into the system of foster care looking at part time because we were both working full time at the time. And then they pretty much said to us, here you go, here are two kids, try them for the weekend and see how you go.

We had these two kids in our home, and they had big sweat rings when they were sleeping, and it was just horrible to watch and we just thought we could make a difference in their life so we took them on full time.

So, the following weekend they showed up with their suitcases. They had two suitcases full of second-hand clothes that smelled like cigarettes. It was horrible. And pretty much it was a journey of let's find a school for them because they're five and six years old.

So, it was a pretty crazy journey. We thought if we can change the lives of these two boys, then we can give them some hope.

Jo: Is that normal that children have nothing to bring into their new home?

Tanya: I don't think there's a normal, if that makes sense. There's nothing normal. Some kids rock up with nothing. It's pretty sad. It really tears at your heartstrings, where you sit there and go, well, I've got a lot, and I can make a change in these kids lives, so let's just go.

These kids have lots of placements generally, where they go from home to home to home.

Jo: What does that do for their sense of identity then?

Tanya: A lot of them don't know who they are. So that's why you often hear that the crime rates are high, and it's generally kids that are in care, because they keep getting moved around. And so they don't really know who they are or where they belong or where they fit, what normal is, what love is, what attachment is. What normal families get to experience or should experience.

Jo: Yeah, and I guess we take that for granted because in a normal loving home, and I don't know what normal is here, but you have a sense of identity, like your place in the family. Whereas these children, I guess each time that they move to a different place, they have a different role, identity, and again, to have to establish that every single time, that would be exhausting.

Tanya: Absolutely. And generally, they come into foster care because their life has been compromised in some way. Because of trauma or abuse or domestic violence, the parents or parental figures might be in jail, or someone's died, or it's often quite traumatic reasons while they come into care.

When they come to you, they come with a lot of baggage. So, you might be thinking that you get along with a kid and it's all happening really well and everyone's happy and there'll be a trigger of the smell of lavender or the cigarette smoke or a kettle boiling or the sound of smashing glass something like that. It will trigger them.

Jo: And then what's their usual response in that case?

Tanya: There's no usual response, Jo.

Jo: I'm learning this. Yes.

Tanya: So you've got to learn to just be there and give them some sort of encouragement and support, and love. Give them a hug, sit down and listen. And they're not often ready to talk either. So it's just about being there, being present, being consistent.

Jo: So what challenges have you had?

Tanya: One thing that I found is that there are attachments that come from the birth family, be they good or bad. These kids have a loyalty to their birth families. So they come into care and although you might be giving them everything that you think a kid needs, they're always going to have their loyalty sit with their parents generally, and that comes with conflicting values as well, where they think, 'what you're doing is okay, but mum who's just come out of jail or just visited in jail, you know, she still loves me and that's where I'm affiliated with.'

It's a daily challenge. You think that you've got a routine going and relationships built and there may be a trigger that comes from left field. So, you're planning a really nice day out to the Adelaide Show or something and there might be something completely left field that would trigger some sort of behaviour. You could pay admission to go to the Adelaide show, and something crazy, the sound of a cow moo or something, would trigger how they were running from the police, and drinking out of troughs, and all sorts of crazy stories from their past. And they may not have mentioned any of these things to you prior to this event occurring.

Jo: And well, I'm getting the impression that sometimes they may not even know what triggers it either.

Tanya: And generally, in care, once the child starts to feel safe and comfortable in your environment is when they're going to start disclosing what's gone on in the past and that's when you get all the authorities in and you need to start recording, you get counsellors in and it just turns a completely different direction. If you've got children in your home, or you've got nieces or nephews or kids that are coming in and out of your home, they may well be troubled or influenced or hurt by these foster kids as well because of where they've been and what their experiences are prior to entering your home. So, that's a big consideration to take into account.

Jo: What has spurred you on or encourage you to keep going?

Tanya: Interesting question because generally it's the change that we can make in a child's life where pretty much we can stop the chain of welfare dependence and things like that by our influence because generally if you look back on these, it's going on for generations.

So just purely by showing them what love and support is and how they can get by and get what you've got in your house, so they can have a house and nice cars and all those sort of things by working hard and, committing to a job and getting out and about and showing some work ethic. That's what changes lives, you know, committing to something.

So yeah, I think it's the motivation that you can change lives.

One example was a couple of kids we looked after more recently, a sibling group. They came to us at the age of 10 and 7. They couldn't read or write, comb their hair, eat with a knife or fork and had a horrible history and generally it was running from the police at night and hiding during the day.

The girl, as a result of the care that we put her through has just recently turned 21 passed her year 12 HSC. She's got a driver's license, has a full-time job and wants to pretty much buy her own home.

Jo: What have been some of your strategies for helping develop and enrich these children's lives?

Tanya: Generally we try and plan things on a weekend or school holidays or whenever the case is that we get these children, that fit the child. Generally, we try and do things that are fun. I tried to create memories that they wouldn't have

experienced. And that always included church. We went to church, so the kids came to church, and it was really supportive congregation that I belonged to up in the Barossa. So they took the kids in their care as well. They're always cared for and looked after and valued and everyone had a chat with them and welcomed them into the church environment. And that was foreign to a lot of the children. We always said grace before a meal. So, they pretty much got integrated into our life as it was.

So, I think that's an invaluable part of what they can take with them as well, is the fact that they can always look to God if they need to, to be able to ask for help in situations that are crazy and they're not coping.

Jo: That's true because God is always constant too. So regardless of situations or people that come in and out of their life, you know that God's going to be a constant for them. And if you can instil that value in them, to know that God is always there to listen, God is always there to be a part of their life, and God loves and cares for them too - what a great message.

Tanya: Yeah, definitely. And it doesn't have to be a booked appointment. A lot of these kids have psychological help and assistance, but that's a booked appointment. So they can only sit there and vent these things at that time frame.

Jo: So, you're saying having access to a professional, you have to have a booked appointment, but with God it's a different story.

Tanya: Absolutely. So, if you're going through some trauma in the middle of the evening and you can't sleep, you can sit there and turn to God and have a chat. And a lot of the kids got some hope from that. So pretty much just being able to sit there and they felt like at peace I guess from having a chat with God.

Jo: Tanya, you've talked about giving the kids, you fostered hope and a place to turn to in God, but has God had an impact on your own life and fostering experience?

Tanya: I think so. I often looked at foster care as being God's answer to me not being able to have kids. And that's what I used to say to a lot of people, and now I believe it more than ever that God gave me the opportunity to foster and change some lives and influence some lives purely through that avenue of not being able to have kids.

I often used to think if we can create good memories, it'll override the bad. But I'm not really sure that that happens as easily as that. But I'd like to think that they can look back and then smile, knowing that that was a loving home that they came into at that point in time.

The last two kids we looked after full time ended up being baptised and confirmed. And both of them said in their faith statements that they'd come out of a really crazy life and come into a life with hope and they could actually look forward to having life along with God. So, I guess you don't understand what influence you're

having on people's lives, on these kids' lives in particular, until they start telling other people when you overhear that.

Jo: So, it's all good and fair to say, 'I wanna be a foster carer', but I'm guessing that there's a lot of parameters around that, that not everybody's gonna be the best fit for it.

What qualities do you need in order to be a foster carer?

Tanya: So, to be a foster carer, you can be married, you can be single, you can be, with pets, without pets.

Jo: And age?

Tanya: Age is not a barrier. So, you can be retired; 25, I think is the minimum age. Because you get a bit of life experience.

A lot of these kids come from places that are pretty low, the biological families are coming from somewhere pretty crazy that you probably can't relate to. So, it's just a matter of understanding that and being willing to work with that, I guess.

So when these kids go to visit their families every month, they're going to come back with behaviours and be completely different to what the child is that you knew. And you've just got to understand that that's what's going to happen. Get back on track and get on with it, and keep smiling.

I think that's the key thing. A lot of laughter and smiles are good.

Jo: Tanya, you've shared some amazing stories here today, and I'm really grateful for you being able to be honest and open about the things that have given you great joy and the things that have given you great trauma and challenge.

But I guess I'd love to hear, do you have any other stories or words of encouragement for people in this space?

Tanya: I think anyone that's even considering foster care as an option needs to just start with the training. Understand the process. It comes in all different forms, so it could be on a weekend, or it could be several weekends, months or whatever. It can take up to six months before you actually get registered. So, there's a lot of opportunity there for you to decide after you go to the training whether this is even for you. I think the key is to step in and just test the water.

And looking at the brochures and all the glossy information about fostering, you want to make a difference in a kid's life and you'll go into that whole process with expectations, but you can't because those expectations 9 out of 10 times won't be met because of various things that are going on in the child's life or the system or something like that.

Prepare to get embarrassed in the journey of all this. And there's no failure. So if you're struggling in your foster care journey, ask for help, take time out.

Looking after yourself is important. Fostering is a lot. And generally, I think what comes with it as well is you appreciate your life and what you have and it's not always that easy for everyone.

Jo: Well also bearing in mind that parenting is hard full stop. Whether it's a child that's just come into your life for a short period of time, or a child that's been with you since birth, it's not always going to be perfect. There's always going to be moments where you might have stuffed up or, something might have gone wrong and that's okay too, isn't it?

Tanya: Oh, absolutely. And it's not a flowchart, life doesn't work like that. You know that, Jo, with four kids. You don't have a rule book that comes with what the kids are like, what they like to eat, what they're allergic to, how they're going to react in different situations. That's part of the fun of it too.

Jo: I really have a great appreciation for what you do, and I've considered foster parenting myself but with my own children and my own lifestyle I know it's not possible, but how can I support people who are in the foster care system?

Tanya: Just, I guess, accept. Accept the kids for who they are. Support us for what we're doing and who we are as well. And I think the whole journey for you as well will be a rewarding one.

I really wasn't aware of it and came in blind that there's probably one in 30 kids in Australia that are in foster care right now. So that means if you've got a child in a school class, the chances are there's one child in that class that's in foster care of some sort.

So, I guess if you put your ear to the ground and you hear that someone's in foster care, support that family. Ask if you can help them, and be a shoulder to cry on for when they need it, not if they need it.

Jo: And so, I'm hearing that as well, with any community that they come into, whether it be a school community or other sort of even sporting associations and places where they can, be cared for. Having a loving foster parent is one thing, but having aunties and uncles and surrogate families is quite significant too, isn't it?

Tanya: They say it takes a village to raise a child and it's the same in foster care. So if you sit there and you know that someone's in care or you're watching that particular child saying, wow, they got some crazy behaviours, you shouldn't be judging because the chances are that kid's come out of a traumatic background, and maybe just go have a chat and just see if you can make a difference in that child's life.

Jo: After all these years of foster caring and knowing what you know now about what it is like and how you've experienced it, would you do it all again?

Tanya: I would definitely do it all again. It's been a great experience, a cool journey. Every child that's come into our care, I know we've had a positive impact on. They've had good memories to take away with them. And I can only hold on to the hope that somewhere in there that God's had an impact in their life as well. So, the seed's been planted for them to have hope and a good future.

Thank you for downloading a script of *Messages of hope*. We pray that it is of benefit to you and gives you hope.

You are free to share this with other people and offer them hope.

Messages of hope radio messages, scripts, and booklets are also available for you at www.messagesofhope.org.au

If you would like to support us to reach out to more people with *Messages of hope*, or you would like more information about us, please go to www.lutheranmedia.org.au, call FREECALL 1800 353 350, or write to us at Reply Paid 65735 Lutheran Media, Box 731, North Adelaide SA 5006.

Thank you for your interest and support of *Messages of hope*.

LUTHERAN.MEDIA))