

ANN & BOB

CARER GOOD NEWS STORY 5



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My name is Ann and I've been married to Bob for 36 years. We have two children but I didn't give birth to them. Our eldest son is 21. He came to us when he was 9-months old. He was our first placement in SA. Our youngest son is 17-yr old and he is completing year 11 this year (2018). I do not believe that you need to be blood to be family.

Then we have a 10-y-o boy who visits our home once a month for the weekend. We enjoy having him. He's fun and a joy to be around. He refers to our home as 'his special place'. It's a pleasure to have a young and active child in our home. I think it benefits my youngest son as he can demonstrate the positive-older-brother role model.

Bob and I decided to create our family through fostering rather than undergo intensive medical intervention. I laugh to myself: Bob has more of the parental genes whereas normally it's the woman who has the nesting urge.

We fostered in another state for 5 years, having three children in our home under short-term care arrangements. We moved to South Australia in the late 1990s and began training that same year. We chose long-term-care arrangements, enabling an alternative way to begin our family. Our first son arrived in late 1997. We fell in love with him immediately!

I believe that it is vital to a child's identity to know where they come from. My children know their biological families. They understand their heritage and where they came from.

I also feel strongly that children need to know there is someone in this world that will support and love them. It is important to belong somewhere and know that no matter what happens, they have a family loves them.

ANN & BOB (continued)

Everyone deserves someone in this world that's absolutely crazy about them. We have shown our boys that we love them unconditionally.

The training in the '90s was different to today. Knowing what types of behaviour can be expected from the children is helpful. Training was focused on a worst-case scenario, so I wasn't surprised when things happened.

I remember this scenario; 'you were going away for a family holiday that had been planned for months. Everyone is excited, you are all packed and ready to go the next morning. Except you discover the tent demolished by the child 12 or 13 yrs. Old. What do you do?'. This type of question is designed to gauge how the family responds to reactive-behaviour from the child. Naughty or trauma-based?.

Another key focus of our training was teamwork. Teamwork between the family that provides the care, the foster-care agency and the government department. It's important to have clear guidelines about communication and respecting other team members. Everyone brings benefits to the team and the focus is on the child and his or her wellbeing.

One of the biggest challenges for our family was having a child with undiagnosed autism. While he was growing up, we were finding the strategies we were using to manage difficult and challenging behaviours were not working for him. We were struggling. I was beside myself, I felt helpless, frustrated because I didn't know how to meet the needs of the child.

I clearly remember this one day, our child was about 10-yrs old and his behaviour was becoming uncontrollable and I received an injury from the child. I called my DCP social worker, Kate, in tears telling her 'I don't know if I can keep doing this'. Kate dropped everything and came straight over.

ANN & BOB (continued)

Kate sat our boy down and had a tough conversation with him. Kate explained there would be real consequences to his actions. Also, there was a discussion on what would happen if his behaviour didn't improve.

He went outside and bounced for 30 minutes on the trampoline. This was his way of processing the information. It was a reality check for him and his behaviour did improve. He had a new respect for his family. We still loved him and just wanted to help him.

Three years later, another DCP social worker - Gordon - came into our lives and suggested our boy could be on the autism spectrum. We'd never thought of the possibility. Gordon arranged for an assessment. Also, Gordon noticed that Bob needed extra support to ensure the placement remained stable. Sometimes fathers can be overlooked, but they're an important part of the family unit and they need support as well.

Another challenge has been the different DCP and agency workers coming into our lives. Trust is vital to a positive working relationship with DCP. Having a good social worker makes a big difference - life's a bit easier.

Finding information resources for children that have experienced trauma is another challenge. Being child-focused, I want to understand the needs of the child so I look everywhere for suitable resources. I've found a good place to start is the foster care agency, the department or local community networks. I've learned that some forms of autism have similar behaviours to trauma behaviours. Undertaking extra training to recognise which strategies work best for your child is important and helpful.

We've grown into our roles as parents, realising the importance of having a good support network around the family. I find that friends are great for personal support and advice, but maybe not so much for the child's perspective as they may not understand the challenges encountered.

ANN & BOB (continued)

We continue to learn about different strategies that might benefit the child. The best source of information and support is fellow Carers as they understand the challenges and 'just get it'.

I keep researching, learning and training with Autism SA to benefit my children. I am actively involved with an advocacy service, foster care agency and work for a community centre offering programs supporting children and families.

I believe there are three major aspects to parenting : legal, nurturing and biological/ heritage which is normally provided by biological parents. However, with children in care, these aspects are separated. It's like co-parenting with your ex-spouse, but your ex-spouse keeps changing.

Another special facet is teaching children how to say 'sorry' and make up after an argument. Children that have experienced trauma and rejection need to learn how to reconnect after a disagreement. It's normal practice to disagree, reconnect, disagree, reconnect. You can still love the person you disagree with. We love our boys.

A family is special and, in our family, it's taken time for the boys to bond. Families from different backgrounds can still engage with each other just like families from the same background. The boys now act like normal brothers that get along and annoy one another.

The children have taught me a lot of different things: strength of character, perseverance, to keep searching for answers, to stand up for what we need, to be assertive without being aggressive, and that you don't have to be flesh and blood to be family. Children need to know where they come from.



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Above all; keep believing. You'll be surprised at the outcome!