

Fostering a better future

Kate Farr finds out how *Project Bridge* is reaping rewards for all concerned.

Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, local charity Mother's Choice has been providing support to children without families and pregnant teenagers in Hong Kong throughout this time.

Part of the charity's ambitious mission is to see every child in a safe, loving and permanent family. Its community-based foster care programme *Project Bridge* matches volunteer families with children from newborn to six years who are in need of essential short-term care.

Mother's Choice chief executive officer Alia Eyres explains, "Our bridge families provide children with a safe and loving family environment, so they have the opportunity to build trust and attachment, develop their sense of identity and belonging, and can continue to thrive - despite the crises at home."

Although the charity has helped to run foster care programmes in conjunction with the Social Welfare department since the 1990s, *Project Bridge* was launched in 2014 with the specific aim of helping those children who often fall between two pillars of the welfare system - unable to return to their birth family, but also unable to move forwards towards adoption. Eyres explains the programme's focus: to provide the best possible short-term care, while working towards a permanent solution.

"There is a very real need for children to have a concrete plan to place them in a permanent family... We don't believe that foster care is a permanent solution for a child without a family, and we seek to ensure that every child can either be reunited with its birth family, or join an adoptive family as soon as possible."

Since launching the scheme, Mother's Choice has found the programme has quickly become a cornerstone of the charity's services.

"Since 2014, over 30 children have been placed into *Project Bridge* homes, and have stayed anywhere from three weeks to 18 months before returning to their birth families or joining an adoptive family," says Eyres. "Even we have been amazed by the incredible change it has made to these children's life stories. When a child is in a safe, loving family, they thrive... We have even seen children who



Fostering a child can provide enormous emotional benefits.

have improved so much that original diagnoses of developmental delays no longer exist."

For those who are considering opening their family to a foster child, there is ample information and support available from the Mother's Choice team. "Following the initial enquiry, a family will be invited to attend a *Project Bridge* information session to learn more about the programme. If they choose to proceed, they'll meet with a social worker, who will spend some time getting to know the family," explains Eyres.

Essential paperwork, such as home assessment, criminal record checks, along with gaining an understanding of family relationships and routines helps to match a child with the right care for their requirements.

I wonder whether potential foster families find it challenging to welcome a child into the family, only to have to let them go? "This is true," admits Eyres. "Every child takes a piece of your heart when they leave, but this fear should not prevent a child from living without a family. In our pre-service training we talk

about this challenge, and give our families tips on how to build love and attachment with a child, as well as how to let go when it's time to leave," she says.

Bridge families are strongly encouraged to support each other throughout the process. "They're uniquely positioned to encourage and advise one another, as they understand the bittersweet experience of loving a child then letting them go to join their forever family," explains Eyres.

And while *Project Bridge* families don't receive any financial incentive for their service, the volunteers are rewarded in other ways. "The change isn't just evident in the child; we've seen families grow closer and stronger as they work together to welcome a child into their home. We're full of admiration for our *Project Bridge* families and the incredible role they play in changing lives in our city."

For more information about Mother's Choice and how to get involved with *Project Bridge*, see motherschoice.org.

Mum Jasmin Blunck describes her experiences of fostering a child.

Having initially attended a talk about *Project Bridge* on the spur of the moment, Jasmin Blunck was moved to raise the prospect of becoming a foster family with husband Max. "I had a discussion with Max and we agreed to go with it," she says. "There was no hesitation that it was the right thing to do."

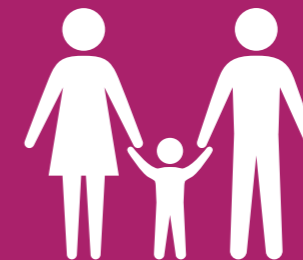
Fate further intervened when their five-year-old daughter Francisca decided that she wanted to donate part of her birthday money to Mother's Choice via the TwoPresents initiative.

"We attended an open day, and were able to hear about *Project Bridge* again. We asked Francisca if she would like to get involved and she said yes."

Once their training was complete, the family had seven-week-old baby "W" placed in their care for ten weeks, until he was ready to go to his forever family. Blunck recalls, "He came into our home and from the start he was part of our family. He already had a routine, and being formula fed meant that my husband could help out with night feeds, which hadn't been possible with my breastfed daughter." She continues, "We loved being able to make a difference to his life, and the love and care that he received from our friends and family. That really blew us away... the support."

On the topic of bonding with W, Blunck is clear. "Someone told me that getting attached means you're doing it right, and for the right reasons." She adds, "We are in contact and I hope we will remain so. Of course there are many moments when we miss him, but our role was always to provide a safe and loving temporary home. While he won't remember his time with us, I hope that our impact on his development will have a positive influence on his future."

Blunck's message to anyone considering fostering a child is simple, "You don't need to be the perfect parent, have a massive house or lots of money to be able to do this; anyone can. What a *Project Bridge* family offers is so much better than the alternative."



Blunck with husband Max and daughter Francisca.



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