



Adeline's story

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I'd love to introduce myself to you to begin this submission but, I won't, as sadly I do not trust that sharing my story, will not come with repercussions, that in itself should speak volumes to you about this system, the people in charge and the policy makers. I am a white woman, raising children who identify as First Nations and this is just a snippet of our care journey so far.

In 2016 I completed my training and became officially registered to open my doors and my heart to fostering children. During the training they taught me not to allow myself to love these future children, not to develop attachments, not to care too much, the very antithesis of what these children need. I am not designed that way, to not develop attachment, love or care.... I should have walked away then, but I did not.

After a few false starts of placements that never eventuated, in early January of 2017, two beautiful boys, just babies really of 1 and 2.5 arrived on my doorstep at 7.30pm, on a Monday night, wearing nothing but a nappy, with a ragged garbage bag of ill-fitting clothing and a pack of disposable nappies as their worldly possessions. The handover lasted no more than 5 minutes: "Please take them to the GP for a checkup tomorrow, someone will call you, are you willing to care for them till they are 18 years old? Yes. Great. Bye."

That was my introduction to what has become 9 years of this unconventional family, a family that grew to 3 boys when the baby was born less than a year later. I had agreed to take on 2, but siblings

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have the right to grow up together, so of course I said yes to 3. Again, they asked, will you agree to be these children's caregiver until they turn 18. Again, I said yes, without a doubt.

Our story is probably no different to many others, in the early days of care, we had many fortnightly trips travelling to family contact with parents that usually didn't make the same effort and who were a no show, more often than not. Parents who didn't have to see the heart broken 2.5-year-old, in tears once again from disappointment. Parents whose rights are more important than that of the child, and still to this day seem to remain so.

During this time, we had many changes of Child Safety Officers (CSOs), we even had a surprise change of child safety centre (CSC), moving us without any notice or explanation, to a centre 30 minutes further away from our home base (which is not in keeping with policy). This change was brief, lasting less than a fortnight, before again without explanation, we were returned to the CSC we'd come from. Unfortunately, this new CSC brought with it my first traumatic experience of my fostering journey. Our newest CSO, called to introduce themselves, and at the same time requested more frequent family contact, weekly, to be held in the city of the new CSC, making that a 3 hour round trip for us. A 3-year-old and 18-month-old. With the great possibility of no parents attending and us just have to turn around and return home yet again. Concerns I expressed. Concerns that were met with a threat, if I could not meet this request, they would find a carer who they could move these children to, who would do as they were told. These children were little human beings, with hearts, souls, emotions. They weren't a bargaining chip, thrown around as ammunition, they weren't numbers, but this system, most definitely this CSO, saw them as such. At this point in my story, these 2 boys had lived with me for close to a year. And I had broken the rules and loved them, as if they were my own. And some faceless person on a phone, who in my first ever conversation with them, threatened to move them from me unless I did as I was told. This phone call had come late on a Friday afternoon, so I spent the weekend in turmoil, fear and dread of this threatened removal of these children. Many prayers were said, and many tears were shed, the weeks moved along, and we returned to the previous CSC, with no further mention of this

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contact arrangement, it was as if the conversation never even occurred. Bizarre? Yes. Unusual? Not particularly, or so I would come to learn.

Over this year, these two boys flourished, I provided everything I could for them, they received various therapies to meet gaps in their developmental and emotional needs, including counselling for trauma-based fear from their abuse and neglect. Very occasionally they saw their parents, and I handled the trauma fallout post visit that they experienced each time. Regardless they grew into happy, curious little people. And then we learned that there was a new sibling, a baby brother had been born, because, in this system, we must protect the parents' rights, and pregnancies are a breach of privacy, so carers must not know about them, until a baby is born and they need to be placed, hopefully with their siblings. There is no consideration for the preparation that is needed for a baby, there is no consideration for the preparation 2 little boys need to have a baby brother enter their lives, preparation a 'normal' family would have for 9 months. And of course, I said yes, we opened our doors and our hearts once more. But the baby didn't come, for 5 months the baby lived elsewhere, because the mother's rights to see the baby, the mother's rights to feed the baby drug filled breastmilk, succeeded the rights of the child to settle into his home from birth, to have stability and grow up from birth with his brothers, the parents' rights always outweigh what is right for the child.

The following year, finally our family grew to three children, a 3-year-old, a 2-year-old and a 5-month-old. They blossomed together, they bonded, they fought, they learned to love (and sometimes hate, as siblings do,) each other. Their parents vanished from their lives, and they continued to grow and develop and thrive. At the end of 2018, their father was incarcerated, and their mother got back in touch. Family contact restarted, and the baby was traumatised by being handed over to a complete stranger, nothing that a baby from a 'normal family' would ever be exposed to. Everything inside me screamed this is not normal, everything science and research tells us about secure attachment in infancy showed me why this was wrong, but the rights of the parents must be met, forget about the rights of the baby being harmed by this emotional upheaval.

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The baby who was so traumatised that on more than one occasion, I was called to collect him early as no one could console him, he had worked himself into such complete distress. Finally, they, the decision makers, decided that this might not be the best decision for this traumatised baby, they decided I should stay with him and the others, and the mother and encourage him to trust her, get to know her, go to her. This is how my relationship with the boys Mum started. A relationship that I have worked hard for years since to develop, to the point that I supervise all contact with her, and she refers to me as the boys other Mum. To the point when she is suicidal, it is me she calls to talk her down. I go above and beyond to ensure this lady is in these boys' lives. Mum C and Mum L, that's who she calls us. And she thanks me, and values me and her people value me and thank me, and they actually make me feel appreciated and welcomed. This is not the norm, this connection is not usually what is the expected outcome in foster families, numerous CSOs have told me as much, many have been impressed by the relationship that we have with her.

In 2019, I fought for my oldest child to have the right to attend a small and more suited to him; private school, when he was due to start school in the following year. After months of stating my case, permission was granted, because if the children were ever moved, they would have to move schools anyway. There it is, the subtle 'veiled' threat that if you don't do as told, they might be taken away.... Ah, now I can see why they told me not to let myself love them. Every year when reviewing our case plans and placement agreements, they put in black and white, 'we continue to search for suitable kin'. There it is again, the chance that they might move them, as they see fit, because to live with complete strangers who have a remote blood connection, would be better for them, than the stability where they are! Message received, family is more important than anything else, relationships, bonds, connections and years, do not matter.

In 2020, after many short-term orders, all three boys were granted a long-term custody order to the chief executive (LTGCE). As normal a life as we could hope at the time. Still a revolving door of strangers in our home for monthly visits from the various stakeholders, and permission to do some of the basic things, go to certain places, participate in certain activities, but a more permanent

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option than living from one short term custody order to another. Life moved along, we continued to see Mum when she could and sometimes wrote or received a letter from Dad in prison.

It was around this time that some more trauma, for me, the carer, occurred. We had been to visit with the biological Mum in the school holidays, she had given us a backpack of things to take home. Things that she once told me were often stolen during her shopping expeditions (but that's another story for another submission). Fortunately, I decided I should unpack this backpack myself, because in it, I found a suicide note, addressed to these boys, from their mother. She never intended for us to find it but had forgotten it was still in the bag from a plan she never went through with. In a panic, I contacted the CS out of hours and was told while they appreciated my concern, my job was to care for the children, not the mother. No one followed up, no one let me know she was ok. I made sure this was documented, but it was not the concern I felt it should have been. I can only imagine how my older child would've reacted had he found the letter, being a very good reader by this point. I was offered no support, no follow up, no advice, it was as if it had not ever happened. The mother continues to suffer with mental health issues to this day.

In 2023 we went through a review, where all of the stakeholders gathered and decided what was best for the boy's future.... all of the stakeholders except for me, carers don't matter. At the time, we had another fairly new CSO, numbering by now, in the 20s, a CSO who came with her own baggage, past hurts from being in residential care as a young person herself and an agenda. She came to home visits and complained about her job, her life and other things, she was lazy and incompetent. She wasn't at all supportive of including the voice of the carer in this review, a CSO who reported my agency support worker for being racist by supporting and voicing my wishes (to be considered for guardianship) as a white woman.

At the time of the review, I was told because I am white and my boys are Indigenous, I could not and never would be considered a candidate for a long-term guardianship to other order (LTGO). I was told it is the blanket policy of the CSC that we sit under, that no white carer of any Indigenous child, ever be granted LTGO, no case by case evaluation, a blanket rule, for every single child who

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sits in the caseload of this office, regardless of situation or circumstance. Not even the opportunity to investigate options, in our case, no kin were ever suitable, an incarcerated father and a mentally ill mother, but still, no consideration for permanency based simply on my race.

I ask you, person reading this story, if I were an Indigenous woman, raising white foster children, would I be told I could never be considered for LTGO because of my race? I can only imagine the cries of racism that would follow such a statement if my situation was reversed. You cannot tell me that I am not being discriminated against because of my race in this situation, because the truth is, I am! I most definitely am! And my children don't have the right to permanency that the system tells them they should.

I have the support of the boy's Indigenous mother, I have the support of her Indigenous aunt, I have the support of the boy's independent person (who I personally found and arranged). I have the support of these boys who by now, have secure attachments with me and my extended family, have firm friendships with their mates, active social lives, hobbies and cultural engagement within their local community. But I would never even have the opportunity to seek the support of my CSO or our CSC because of the CSC's blanket 'policy', not legislation, not even genuinely policy, but the viewpoint of a group of people running this particular CSC. It eats away at me, the unfairness of this situation, I am sure it will for the rest of my life.

As I write this, our story, we have a CSO who says thank you and appreciates the miles I go to for these boys that I love. Yet, a CSO who remains bound by the rules of the CSC we sit under. We approach 9 years of life together, during these 9 years we have many, many more stories that we could share of joy and of frustration and the unjust system we work with. In these 9 years, I have been asked to take on cousins and other children who need a home, in an overburdened system. A system crying out for more carers. A system that is full to the brim and overflowing. A system that advocates permanency, but yet doesn't actually value the permanent options that they have in front of their faces. A system that does not value or embrace the carers like me. A system that I would not recommend anyone join because of my experience. I love these three boys as if they

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came from my own flesh and blood, as do my family and friends, but I hate the system we must survive in, it is hard, and unfair, and clinical and for that, I would never encourage another to experience it. But in the same breath, I will never be sorry for the family that we have become and the love that we have and I would not change that for anything. These children deserve a chance for a normal future; ALL children deserve a chance for a normal future. But this current system, the model we work under, it doesn't provide that, and for that I am heartbroken, not only for my foster children, but for the 12,000 others experiencing this system also. Each one of them deserve a normal future, this current system is not providing that, please work to change it for the sake of them all.

Thank you.