

**COUPLES' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD
BY FOSTERING A CHILD**

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Abstract

This study explored the under-researched phenomenon of first-time parenthood through fostering, utilizing an interpretative phenomenological approach. Three heterosexual couples, over the age of forty, with at least seven years of parental experience, participated in both joint and individual interviews. The findings' emergent themes encompassed the particularity of this transition to parenthood, which incorporated a vast range of emotions. The participants anticipated challenges and unpredictability, while emphasizing the need for flexibility and complete commitment from each other's partner. Fostering a child brought joy and helped them discover their newly found parental identity, but it also involved complexities exclusive to the fostering experience. They were tasked to care for children with trauma, whilst having to navigate a complex foster care system, highlighting the importance for a strong support network. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research were presented.

Keywords: “fostering”, “motivations to foster”, “fostering transition”, “role of foster carers”, “parenting”, “couple relationships”.

Dedication

I would like to thank the couples who participated in this study. I was moved by their ability of converting their personal struggles into becoming highly invested parental figures.

My admiration also extends to all those foster carers who are also dedicating their lives to create a secure attachment for those vulnerable children who require alternative care.

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I would like to share heartfelt appreciation towards my soon-to-be wife, Julia. She has accompanied me throughout this journey and offered me relentless support. She helped me get through some of the toughest moments in this journey, having always been there whenever I needed. I only hope that I can make it up to you in our next chapter of life, as much as you have been there for me, and more!

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 – Introduction	1
1.1 Preamble.....	1
1.2 What is Fostering?.....	1
1.3 Who are foster children?	2
1.4 What motivates people to foster?	3
1.5 Implications in becoming a foster carer	4
1.6 My position within the context of fostering	5
1.7 Rationale.....	5
1.8 Research Question.....	6
1.9 Conceptual Frameworks.....	6
1.10 Conclusion.....	7
Chapter 2 - Literature Review.....	8
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 The couple relationship and effective parenting	9
2.2.1 Factors influencing couples who foster	9
2.2.2 Gender and role negotiation	10
2.2.3 Parenting Styles	12
2.3 The implications of parenting foster children	12

2.3.1 Am I a parent or carer?	12
2.3.2 Therapeutic Parenting.....	13
2.4 Challenges in fostering.....	15
2.4.1 Parental stress in fostering.....	15
2.4.2 The agency.....	16
2.4.3 Foster child's biological family	18
2.4.4 Living with the unknown.....	19
2.5 The support needed	19
2.6 Conclusion.....	20
Chapter 3 – Methodology	21
3.1 Introduction	21
3.2 Research Question.....	21
3.3 Research Design.....	21
3.3.1 Rationale in choosing a phenomenological approach	21
3.3.2 The development of IPA	23
3.3.3 The three philosophical tenets	24
3.4 Research Participants	25
3.5 Recruitment Process.....	26
3.6 Data Collection.....	27
3.6.1. Semi-structured interviews	27
3.6.2 Interview Guide	28

3.6.2 Conducting the Interview	28
3.7 Data Analysis.....	29
3.8 Strategies to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.....	30
3.9 Ethical Considerations.....	31
3.10 Reflexivity	32
3.11 Conclusion.....	33
Chapter 4 – Findings.....	34
4.1 Introduction	34
4.2 Presentation of Participants.....	34
4.3 Table of Themes	34
4.4 Parenting as a Life Purpose.....	36
4.4.1 Infertility.....	36
4.4.2 Considering adoption.....	37
4.4.3 The couple’s joint decision to parent through fostering	37
4.5 Pandora’s Box	39
4.5.1 An emotional journey which necessitates a strong couple relationship	40
4.5.2 Journey towards a unique transition	41
4.5.3 A change requiring flexibility and new routines.....	43
4.6 Parenting Plus.....	44
4.6.1 The joy in fulfilling a parental role for the first time.....	44
4.6.2 Adapting to a new and unique parenting role	45

4.6.3 Discovering one's parenting style.....	46
4.6.4 Complexities of parenting a foster child.....	46
4.7 A Therapeutic Endeavour	47
4.7.1 Therapeutic Parenting.....	47
4.7.2 Taking over another's parenting	48
4.8 A Difficult but Fulfilling Journey	50
4.8.1 The ups and downs of parenting through fostering	50
4.8.2 Impact on self and the relationship.....	51
4.8.3 An experienced lack of sensitivity	52
4.8.4 Caring for the child of another	54
4.9 The Support Needed.....	55
4.9.1 Essential support, cooperation, and help	55
4.9.2 The support needed to fulfil the parenting role better	56
4.10 Conclusion.....	57
Chapter 5 – Discussion	58
5.1 Introduction	58
5.2 Before transitioning into parenthood.....	58
5.2.1 A yearning to become a parent	58
5.2.2 Difficult stories and emotions.....	59
5.2.3 Considering alternative options	59
5.2.4 Their expectations.....	60

5.3 Stepping into the world of parenting through fostering	61
5.3.1 A change that brought out many emotions	61
5.3.2 New levels of flexibility & adjustment.....	62
5.3.3 The added weight that comes with fostering	63
5.4 Conclusion.....	66
Chapter 6 – Conclusion.....	67
6.1 Introduction	67
6.2 Salient Findings.....	67
6.4 Implications for practice.....	68
6.5 Limitations and Recommendations for future research	69
6.6 Conclusion.....	69
References.....	71
Appendix A – Information Letter.....	82
Appendix B – Participant’s Consent Form	86
Appendix C – Interview Schedules.....	90
Appendix D – Sample of analysed transcript	92
Appendix E – Quote translations Maltese to English	93

Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Preamble

When couples achieve stability, it is common for them to have a conversation and decide about whether they plan to expand their family. The transition into parenthood is considered as one of life's major transitions (McGoldrick et al., 2016) and also one of the most important milestones that couples look forward to (Cowan & Cowan, 2018). The journey involves lots of planning, expectations, as well as different emotions (Ngai & Loke, 2022).

However, some couples may encounter difficulties in having children of their own, raising the likelihood to consider alternative options, such as adoption or fostering (Chodura et al., 2020). This dissertation shall focus on the latter, zooming into couples' experiences of first-time parenthood in conjunction with the unique and complex process of fostering.

5.3 What is Fostering?

When child welfare agencies identify families who fail to meet the basic needs of minors and create a harmful environment, following several legal procedures, minors are removed from that environment and placed in residential or foster care. Foster families are preferred to residential homes as they can tailor their care to the unique needs of children who have experienced neglect or abuse, supporting their developmental needs (Bergman, 2016; Gouveia et al., 2021; Vanderfaeille et al., 2020).

The aim of fostering is to achieve the reunification of foster children to their biological family (Lanigan & Burleson, 2017). There is 'kinship' and 'non-kinship' fostering. The former takes place when child welfare agencies explore possibilities to keep children

within their own family system, often with grandparents taking up the responsibility to care for their grandchildren after their own children lose legal parental rights (Kozlova, 2013). Kinship fostering often leads towards permanency rather than reintegration, and experiences less difficulties and placement breakdowns than non-kinship fostering (Bell & Romano, 2015; Chanteauneuf et al., 2022).

When kinship placements are not an option, non-kinship foster care is sought to offer temporary but full-time support to children that require an alternative family environment (Lietz et al., 2016).

5.3 Who are foster children?

The number of children who require alternative care has been on the increase (Blythe et al., 2013; Harding et al., 2020; York & Jones, 2017). With little control over their lives, these children are disconnected from several significant relationships (Mitchell, 2016) and are expected to adapt into a new environment within a complex system (Lewis, 2011). Resultantly, foster children experience post-traumatic stress symptoms, face several developmental difficulties and find it difficult to form secure relationships (Chodura et al., 2020; Frederico et al., 2017; Teculeasa et al., 2023). Hence, foster carers house some of the most troubled children in society who struggle to elicit their full range of emotions, having been denied a chance to identify and express their feelings when growing up.

It is imperative, therefore, that fostered children feel accepted and attended to by adults who adapt to their needs (Chanteauneuf et al., 2022; Lanigan & Burleson, 2017). This shift may elicit grief for the lost opportunity to be loved by their biological family (Sprecher et al., 2021). To help these children experience less split loyalties, supporting a common

permanent plan between their foster and biological families is crucial (Gouveia et al., 2021; Sprecher et al., 2021).

Like all other children, foster children want and deserve to experience healthy interactions with adults who care for them and help them navigate life. The formation of secure attachments is immensely powerful in supporting children through multiple stages of development (Denby et al., 2016), reflected through new life-changing trusting relationships once these children overcome their barriers (Sprecher et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of empowering foster carers' capabilities in empathy and deep psychological understanding (York & Jones, 2017).

1.4 What motivates people to foster?

Deciding to become a foster carer involves a thoughtful complex process (De Maeyer et al., 2014; Randle et al., 2016; Sitjes-Figueras et al., 2022). Prospective applicants may have intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Gouveia et al., 2021) to foster, which 'arise from a person's theories about how life is and how life should be' (De Maeyer et al., 2014, p.144).

Applicants may strive to expand their family or achieve parental goals. The latter is often triggered by their inability to have biological children, increasing their likelihood of considering adoption or fostering (Chodura et al., 2020; Kozlova, 2013). Most foster carers have self-oriented motivations; however, being led by them alone is not ideal. Individuals who are led by child-oriented motivations are better able to embrace the scope of fostering and feel more satisfied in fulfilling the role, resulting in better retention (Chodura et al., 2020). Hence, agencies need to evaluate applicants' motives to foster, since these ultimately predict carers' attachment qualities (Cole, 2005).

1.5 Implications in becoming a foster carer

Foster carers describe their experience as ‘life altering’ (p.15) whereby they gain a new perspective towards life (Cooley et al., 2017). Accepting that the journey may be a temporary one is difficult to accept (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020). By fulfilling their role to accommodate a foster child, many adaptations that affect, challenge, and transform families are needed (Mitchell, 2016).

The roles of foster carers are complex, and integrating a family’s culture with their foster-caring responsibilities is quite demanding (Gabler, et al., 2018; Harding et al., 2020; Mancinelli et al., 2021; Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020). Whilst navigating new relationships can be challenging (Sprecher et al., 2021), foster carers’ evolving ability to adapt tends to improve family relationships and overall functioning (Piel et al., 2016).

Flexibility is needed since foster carers are responsible for carrying out multiple tasks, including caring for the child’s physical and mental health, coordinating with various services, supporting children’s connections with their biological family, enhancing opportunities for child development and responding to life-changing decisions (Douglas, 2018; Lewis, 2011; Mancinelli et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2022). Lanigan and Burleson (2017) also identified three main tasks for foster carers, namely, establishing trust and a sense of belonging, re-establishing family homeostasis, and collaborating with professionals. Their role demands various requirements: being responsive, emotionally affective and trauma-informed; having child-oriented motivations, with realistic expectations; being able to manage time; having access to resources; and showing ability to implement good parenting skills (Lanigan & Burleson, 2017; Van Holen et al, 2019). Foster carers are also expected to handle difficult behaviour, to understand trauma and manage their parenting stress (Bergsund

et al., 2019; Vanderfaeille et al., 2020; Van Holen et al., 2019). Hence, the efficacy in fulfilling these roles strongly impacts a foster child's development (Chodura et al., 2020).

1.6 My position within the context of fostering

As a social worker in the Fostering Service within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS), I support couples embarking on the journey to foster a child. I meet new applicants, provide pre-service training, carry out assessments, and follow a number of already approved foster families. These experiences raised my interest towards people who not only become foster carers but who also transition into a parenting role for the first time.

1.7 Rationale

There is existing literature about the fostering experience, as well as on the transition to parenthood; however, a research gap exists when combining the transition to parenthood through the fostering experience. As a trainee therapist, and as a social worker with foster families, I have become highly interested in couples who simultaneously learn how to be effective foster carers and are also experiencing basic parental roles for the first time. Specific literature about such couples is lacking and, therefore, this study seeks to address this gap. My research can shed light on the unique experience of similar couples and can be resourceful to professionals who work with foster families and childless couples interested in fostering.

1.8 Research Question

Hence, the research question for this study is:

‘What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?’

1.9 Conceptual Frameworks

The focus of this research suggests the implementation of five different conceptual frameworks.

An attachment perspective, which focuses on emotional bonds, particularly those between children and their caregivers (Bowlby, 1988), can enhance my curiosity towards how foster carers’ own childhood stories may influence their parental experience in fostering.

The family system theory zooms into the emotional interconnectedness between family members. It places particular focus on how interpersonal exchanges influence behaviour and well-being (Bowen, 1966) and thus helps me to discover the unique interactions that may take place in the lives of the research participants.

By delving into a family’s roles, rules, and boundaries, Minuchin’s (1974) structural lens provides insight on the influence such factors may have on the parental experience, the couple relationship, and even the overall impact on the family system.

A narrative lens (White & Epston, 1989) appreciates the unique stories of people and advises on the importance of taking a not-knowing position. The latter is especially important since my role as a social worker within the Fostering Service can influence my assumptions. Moreover, this framework leads me to discover and appreciate the respective backgrounds of participants which may have strongly affected the formation of their unique selves.

Finally, a family life cycle perspective (McGoldrick et al., 2016) throws light on the major shifts in one's life history. In this study, not only have the research participants experienced a major transition into parenthood, but they simultaneously learned the ropes of fostering.

1.10 Conclusion

This introductory chapter helped the reader to better understand 'fostering', 'fostered children' and their 'carers'. The next chapter examines existing literature on fostering and the transition to parenthood. The third chapter describes the methodology and research design of this study. Chapters four and five present the research findings and final discussion. A concluding chapter summarizes the dissertation's key contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of existing literature on couple relationships, fostering, and transition to parenting.

A thorough literary search was conducted through the University of Malta Hydi Database, incorporating sources from – SAGE, Elsevier, Routledge, Springer, Wiley, JSTOR and BioMed Central. The main keywords used for the search included: “fostering”, “motivations to foster”, “fostering transition”, “role of foster carers”, “parenting in fostering”, and “couple relationships”.

The search generated literature on the transition into fulfilling fostering and parental roles (Chanteauneuf et al., 2022; Gabler et al., 2018; Mancinelli et al., 2021; Vanderfaeille et al., 2020, Pinto & Luke 2022) as well as the challenges experienced by foster carers (Chodura et al., 2020; Richardson et al., 2022; Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020; Sprecher et al., 2021). However, there was no specific literature on the experience of couples who transition into parenthood for their first time through fostering. Since the aim is to address this research gap, literature around the topic shall support me throughout the study.

Hence, this chapter sets off by focusing on the couple relationship and effective parenting, followed by a section on the implications and challenges connected to fostering, and highlighting support needed.

2.2 The couple relationship and effective parenting

2.2.1 Factors influencing couples who foster

The couple relationship is considered to be the basis for effective parenting (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Grech Lanfranco, 2020). Thus, whilst professionals tend to prioritize child-related problems, research shows that giving attention to the couple relationship is beneficial, especially so in the context of fostering (Lewis, 2011; Richardson E. W. et al., 2022). Whilst personality traits, psychological wellbeing and past experiences are all significant factors towards understanding this relationship (Pinto & Luke, 2022), it is important to understand how foster carers are positioned by their own life narratives when fulfilling their roles (White & Epston, 1990).

In Cooley et al.'s (2020) study, sixty-eight percent of the studied foster carers experienced some form of adverse childhood experience. This value is significantly high and foster carers should be supported to be able to differentiate their needs from those of the child (Cooley et al., 2020; Pinto & Luke, 2022). This process may allow them to be 'wounded healers' (Jung et al., 2014) where past experiences can be resourceful in helping a child heal from trauma.

Couples who foster experience multiple demanding situations which can interfere with their relationship, such as parenting stress, work-family conflicts, as well as other emotions exclusive to the fostering journey (Gabler, et al., 2018; Gouveia et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2022; Richardson E. W. et al., 2023). A circular dynamic tends to manifest itself when the externalized stress of one partner easily influences the other's perception of a given situation. In fact, highly anxious partners are seen to emulate feelings of lack of support due to their unavailability and high stress levels (Gabler, et al., 2018).

Dissatisfaction and tension often feature in couple relationships as a result of having to manage new parental roles after the birth of a child and also having to deal with previous existing difficulties (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Evidence suggests that the couple relationship quality impacts parenting effectiveness, conflict management, and also interacts directly with the child's behaviour and wellbeing (Cowan et al., 2014; Grech Lanfranco, 2021). In fostering, couples have to manage all this whilst also having to learn how to fulfill their newlyfound roles as foster carers. This highlights the importance of a healthy couple relationship amongst couples who foster as it helps reduce stress and improves their ability to care for foster children (Lohaus, et al., 2017; Mancinelli et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2022).

In fact, couple cooperation in fostering promotes burden sharing (Mancinelli et al., 2021) and facilitates smoother transitions (Lietz et al., 2016). Mindfulness increases satisfaction since both individuals are more attuned to remain curious about each other's unique experiences, which creates an opportunity for collaborative change (Piel et al., 2016; Richardson E. W. et al., 2023). Moreover, nurturing a positive couple relationship serves as an important model to children, while creating a needed space which is conducive to safety and acceptance (Richardson E. W. et al., 2023). In order to sustain a positive couple relationship, the adaptations required by foster families calls for effective role negotiation within the couple (Heslop, 2019), which shall be explored in the next section.

2.2.2 Gender and role negotiation

Prior expectations moulded traditional gender roles where fathers took the provider role and mothers were the 'keeper of the family heart' (Kaufman & Bernhardt, 2015; Kozlova, 2013, p.70). As societies evolve and become more diverse, family roles aim to evolve beyond traditional gender roles (Blythe et al., 2013). When couples adopt an

egalitarian attitude, it is likely that they will both make the effort to make amendments to meet the evolving needs of the family, such as changing working hours and reorganising priorities (Kaufman & Bernhardt, 2015).

Although society is evolving, foster mothers tend to spend more time with children, and so, they are more likely to discover a foster child's internalizing difficulties (Lohaus, et al., 2017). Moreover, even though the involvement and perspectives of males are important (Gouveia et al., 2021), they sometimes end up as an overlooked resource since fostering agencies tend to seek information directly from females (Gilligan, 2016). In Heslop's (2019) study, foster fathers were strongly motivated to immerse themselves into the experience of caring for foster children. They assumed non-traditional gender roles, however, when their wife returned home, certain traditional roles would resume since mothering felt distant and somewhat out of bounds to them.

Due to past aversive backgrounds, such as prostitution, a foster child's bond with a male foster carer may be their first personal relationship with a male caregiver. Foster children may have their own idea of what a male figure represents, and therefore, it is important that they also witness a positive male role model (Richardson E. W. et al., 2022).

In summary, the ability to negotiate rather than assume parental roles, and to simultaneously manage a multitude of other fostering-exclusive tasks through communication, is key towards a successful fostering experience (Douglas, 2018; Heslop, 2019; Richardson E. W. et al., 2022). This element of teamwork is required since foster carers carry the responsibility of fulfilling unique parenting styles.

2.2.3 Parenting Styles

Foster carers often worry that they are not doing enough when children exhibit difficult behaviour (Randle et al., 2016). The training they receive supports them to understand that change takes time (Gabler et al., 2018). Positive parenting strategies have been shown to create a sense of safety and address a foster child's unique needs, minimizing behavioural problems (Fuentes et al., 2014; Goemans et al., 2020).

When carers adopt authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, children feel criticized and rejected, and this amplifies challenging behaviour (Fuentes et al., 2014; Mancinelli et al., 2021). An authoritative parenting style is effective with children who experience emotional dysregulation as it promotes clear boundaries, warmth, acceptance, better child development opportunities, and more collaboration when tailoring parenting methods (Chodura et al., 2020; Mancinelli et al., 2021). Hence, functional parenting is when foster carers are able to adapt their parenting style in a way that addresses foster children's evolving needs (Chodura et al., 2020; Fuentes et al., 2014). While flexibility is key towards a successful fostering placement, parental styles are not the only factor. There are other implications involved in the journey of fostering a child.

2.3 The implications of parenting foster children

2.3.1 Am I a parent or carer?

The identities assimilated to the terms 'parent' and 'carer' are quite distinct from one another. Classifying foster carers as either professional or parental is an over-simplification to their unique identity (Sprecher et al., 2021). While fostering necessitates a good grasp on basic parenting roles, it also involves additional exclusive roles, such as working on the

relationship between the child and biological family, to support the children's unique needs and to collaborate with agencies and professionals (Pinto & Luke, 2022).

In Blythe et al.'s (2013) study, female carers identified themselves as mothers for long-term placements, however, they felt it inappropriate to do so when the child's stay was temporary. Short-term placements tended to create emotional boundaries, helping foster carers cope with the idea of letting go. Since caring for children carries a 'natural emotive element' (Blythe et al., 2013, p.1063), foster carers who identified themselves as parents seemed more motivated to achieve permanency, enlarge their family system, build a secure attachment, thus aiming towards parental achievements notwithstanding their awareness of not being biological parents (Schofield et al., 2013).

On the other hand, Schofield et al. (2013) indicated that those who identified as foster carers embraced the aim of reintegration in fostering, hence being more likely to reach out towards agencies for support. They were open to short-term placements, but would then face similar emotional barriers as carers described in Blythe et al.'s (2013) study. The latter is an important consideration since some foster carers get lost in the 'parenting plus' role which undermines the quality of the child-carer relationship (Pinto & Luke, 2022).

Rather than identifying themselves as either 'parent' or 'carer', foster carers' ability to shift flexibly between both identities enhances role negotiation, resilience, emotional regulation and the ability to form secure attachments (Schofield et al., 2013).

2.3.2 Therapeutic Parenting

In addition to a 'parent' or 'carer' identity, foster carers also carry a therapeutic role. The term 'therapeutic foster care' originates from the early 1980s whereby it was assimilated to treatment in the form of an enhanced kind of care, away from residential and medical

institutions (Frederico et al., 2017). Therapeutic foster care founded a shift from behavioural treatment towards a psychodynamic orientation (Frederico et al., 2017), representing a departure from classic institutional care to considering the child-foster carer relationship as the catalyst initiating emotional and behavioural change (Douglas, 2018). This path allows foster carers to intervene therapeutically, based on the acquisition of in-depth knowledge about a child's life (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020).

Even though foster carers cannot be a child's therapist, there are benefits in adopting therapeutic interventions. Therapeutic parenting prioritizes children's trauma, requiring a deep understanding of their situation. Foster children may struggle with emotional regulation mostly because they may have not been exposed to an appropriate parenting environment that enabled emotional regulation (Douglas, 2018).

In the process of becoming foster carers, applicants must reflect on how their own life script may influence their parenting practice. This awareness helps foster carers differentiate their own emotions while maintaining a curious stance towards the child's needs and feelings (Douglas, 2018; Lewis, 2011; Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020). Understanding children's unique needs requires attentiveness to both verbals and non-verbals. For example, Luckow (2020) found that foster carers were baffled by the negative responses to what they considered healthy body contact, highlighting the added challenges of parenting in the context of fostering. Not only is there a transition to parenting, but there is also the need to be therapeutically mindful. Due to the exposure of trauma, children often experience post-traumatic stress symptoms, difficulties in forming secure attachments, and a range of impairments across several areas of development. Therapeutic foster care prioritizes the child's traumatic experience, leading to significantly better outcomes for children (Douglas, 2018; Frederico et al., 2017; Teculeasa et al., 2023).

In addition to implementing therapeutic methods of parenting, foster carers face multiple hurdles throughout their experience.

2.4 Challenges in fostering

Four main areas that foster carers find challenging are handling parental stress, their interaction with the fostering agency, issues arising from the child's biological family and their experience of living with the unknown.

2.4.1 Parental stress in fostering

Foster carers require a broad parenting skill-set since children who have never experienced a secure attachment may not respond to normal parenting approaches (Douglas, 2018). Their parental experience is crucial in determining retention levels (Leathers et al., 2019) and it is often reported that they suffer great stress since housing foster children is not the regular parenting experience (Gabler, et al., 2018; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2013). Influencing factors to parental stress are the foster carer's subjective perception of a child's externalising behaviour (Mancinelli et al., 2021), as well as the stage of fostering they are in (Richardson E. W. et al., 2022). Moreover, managing newly found parental roles may challenge a couple's relationship (Richardson E. W. et al., 2022) as is the case with new parents in general (McGoldrick et al., 2016).

In their longitudinal study, Goemans et al., (2020) found that over forty percent of foster carers felt stressed, with an experienced increase throughout the COVID pandemic (Miller et al., 2020). This is worrisome considering the significant correlation between parental stress and a foster child's behavioural problems and developmental outcomes

(Chodura et al., 2020; Gabler, et al., 2018; Goemans et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020). A circular pattern can be noticed, where the child's internalizing and externalizing behaviour increases stress (Bergsund et al., 2019; Lohaus, et al., 2017; Mancinelli et al., 2021), potentially eliciting dysfunctional parenting behaviours, decreasing their ability to address a foster child's unique needs, and further amplifying externalizing behaviours (Bergsund et al., 2019; Goemans et al., 2020; Lohaus, et al., 2017). This interaction is in fact supported by research on parenting and child behaviour, where there is increased risk of child maltreatment (Grech Lanfranco, 2020).

Resilience is a transactional process of coping and adapting, and is key to reducing parental stress, while also improving one's satisfaction and coping mechanisms (Cooley et al., 2020). Specialised parenting programs and self-care can help foster carers become resilient, enhancing their ability to support children and form healthy attachments (Bergström, et al., 2020; Frederico et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2019). Moreover, throughout the fostering journey, foster families learn unique capabilities and find their strengths, which helps them understand what resilience means (Piel et al., 2016), whereby overcoming challenges, helping individuals grow and boosting their confidence and motivation to sustain a healthy family environment (Lietz et al., 2016).

2.4.2 The agency

The agency plays an important role in the fostering journey since its decisions greatly influence foster families (Gouveia et al., 2021). An example is seen from the very beginning of the journey whereby, in the matching process, the capabilities of foster carers and the needs of foster children are compared (Vanderfaeille et al., 2020). Achieving placement

stability is a major challenge for child protection services and, therefore, their support towards foster families after transition is vital (Chanteauneuf et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, there are multiple sources which indicate that foster carers do not feel supported and involved enough by the system. They feel burdened by the challenges involved to foster a child with added complexities of child welfare systems seen as unnecessary (Mancinelli et al., 2021). Moreover, foster carers do not feel prepared enough and yearn for more training to better understand and manage challenging behaviour (Cooley et al., 2017; Mancinelli et al., 2021; Octoman & McLean, 2014; Vanderfaeille et al., 2020). Rather than being expected to readily adjust to decisions taken by the system (Cooley et al., 2017), foster carers wish to be involved and desire psychological support to adapt to arising challenges (Mancinelli et al., 2021; Pinto & Luke, 2022). They feel that their efforts are not validated, an example of this is by what is described as feeling ‘disenfranchised grief’ after experiencing reintegration (Lynes and Siteo, 2019). The depth of their pain is not understood by the agency and their voices are not always taken seriously. Moreover, they also feel judged, misunderstood and uncertain about what is expected from them, placing them in an ambiguous situation whereby they are fearful and discouraged to share information (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020; York & Jones, 2017).

In a study carried out with different agencies by Sitjes-Figueras et al. (2022), the child’s opinion was far from being a major factor in decision making, where several pending care plans co-existed, leaving foster families greatly uncertain. The study also indicated how many systems suffered from ‘fragmentation’, creating duplication of work. When roles of different professionals are clearly defined and aligned with the support given to the child, foster carers are better able to share concerns and feel better informed at decision making (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020).

The working relationship between foster carers and their respective social workers is fundamental (Cooley et al., 2017; York & Jones, 2017) as they listen, support and monitor foster families (Randle et al., 2016). Limited resources can negatively impact this relationship as the frequency of visits contribute towards feeling supported (Cooley et al., 2017; Vanderfaeille et al., 2020). Visits can be uncomfortable since they take place in a family's personal space, however, they are welcomed as opportunities to discuss a foster child's ongoing situation (Vanderfaeille et al., 2020).

2.4.3 Foster child's biological family

It is challenging for foster carers to establish a positive relationship with biological parents who were stripped from their legal custody of their children (Lanigan & Burleson, 2017). In fact, the expectations of fostering experiences are negatively impacted with the emergence of conflict with birth parents (Vanderfaeille et al., 2020). Foster carers worry when certain patterns in emotions and behaviour emerge before and after visits. These can manifest themselves in the child in the form of nightmares, behavioural difficulties and anxiety (Shdaimah & Rosen, 2020). Despite the therapeutic value in sustaining the relationship between children and their biological families (Frederico et al., 2017), there is a complicated perspective about it. Building and maintaining a relationship with a foster child's biological family is stressful (Mancinelli et al., 2021) and having more knowledge about the child's past trauma can impact a foster carer's willingness to build such relationship (Lanigan & Burleson, 2017).

2.4.4 Living with the unknown

Foster carers that build positive attachments with foster children are prone to being emotionally at-risk when reintegration with biological families takes place. This can interfere with family functioning and create feelings of uncertainty and instability (Richardson et al., 2022; Sprecher et al., 2021). Raising someone else's child is a difficult task (Kozlova, 2013) and, even though reunification is a major goal in fostering, foster carers often feel hesitant since their role is infused with uncertainty (Blythe et al., 2013; Lanigan & Burleson, 2017). This makes them feel vulnerable knowing that their investment in the relationship with the child may be short-lived (Sprecher et al., 2021).

Uncertainty and lack of control prevents foster carers from emotionally investing themselves, creating a barrier to cope (Cole, 2005). For trusting relationships to develop, acute feelings of uncertainty, vulnerability and mistrust must be overcome with the right source of support (Sprecher et al., 2021), which is what the next section shall delve into.

2.5 The support needed

Foster carers require multiple support systems to cope (Piel et al., 2016). While foster carers yearn for professional support and guidance from the fostering agency (Mancinelli et al., 2021; Vanderfaeille et al., 2020), they cherish support received from other foster carers since their experiences are mutually relatable (Lynes & Siteo, 2019; Octoman & McLean, 2014). Seeking support from their family and close support systems is also important for foster carers as it helps retention (Pinto & Luke, 2022).

Foster carers feel the need for more training in self-regulation and in creating realistic expectations (Cooley et al., 2017; Lanigan & Burleson, 2017; Schoemaker, et al., 2020). Since their needs evolve over time, it is important for agencies to monitor and link support

accordingly (Randle et al., 2016). For instance, counselling is considered beneficial for those experiencing grief after reintegration (Lynes & Siteo, 2019), whilst respite services support foster couples to nourish their own couple relationship (Richardson E. W. et al., 2022).

Self-care is another vital attribute in this journey. Rather than being considered as a singular event, it is encouraged to be implemented into daily practice whereby foster carers are mindful about the time they need to themselves. Self-care helps in improving resilience as it sustains foster carer's energy levels and abilities to continue caring for troubled children (Miller et al., 2019).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented existing literature on relevant areas connecting to parenting in foster care. The next chapter presents the methodology of the study.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the reader with a description of the methodology used throughout this research, which includes the design, data collection process and data analysis, strategies used to ensure credibility and trustworthiness, as well as ethical considerations. Reflexive thoughts are also included.

3.2 Research Question

My work with foster families has led me to admire foster carers who open their hearts to provide traumatised children with a safe and loving family environment. I feel particularly moved by couples who manage to simultaneously learn parenting roles for their first time whilst also taking on a new role as foster carers. The lack of research around couples who experience these simultaneous transitions, coupled with my experience as a social worker within the Fostering Service, inspired me to explore the question: ‘What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?’

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Rationale in choosing a phenomenological approach

In comparison to the way a quantitative approach objectively measures phenomena to identify patterns to a research topic (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005), a qualitative approach enables a researcher to focus on the meanings made by people of the world around them and of their life experiences (Willig, 2013). In order to immerse myself into couples’ experiences of

transitioning into another phase in their lifecycle (McGoldrick et al., 2016), a qualitative design was deemed appropriate since it requires ‘the collection and analysis of non-numerical data through a psychological lens in order to provide rich descriptions and possible explanations of people’s meaning-making’ (Lyons, 2011, p.4).

Keeping in mind the research question, it was important to select the right approach since, as the researcher, I sought a detailed insight into the experience of transitioning into parenting, including how it may have affected the participants’ individual self as well as their couple relationship.

Different qualitative approaches were considered and the choice was not straightforward since different approaches may have yielded unique results. Grounded theory is a methodology that aims to develop theories from the data collected. This is done by analysing patterns found which can then generate a theoretical understanding of emerging phenomena (Charmaz, 2014). Hence, it was not the right approach for my study since, rather than generating a theoretical understanding, I sought to achieve experiential information of a couple’s unique transition. Thematic analysis is another research method that seeks to formulate meaning by identifying and analyzing emerging patterns in the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since my goal was to capture the emotions and interpretations of the participants’ experience rather than patterns, it was not considered as appropriate to answer my research question. Narrative analysis was also considered since it is a research method that attempts to create meaning out of the unique stories presented by participants and understand the way they construct their identity (Burck, 2005). Whilst I cherish how potential participants may have their own unique narratives of such a life changing transition (White & Epston, 1989) narrative analysis does not delve into the formulated meaning of a lived experience (Brocki & Wearden, 2007).

On the other hand, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a qualitative research method that is idiographic as it attempts to understand the unique lived experiences of particular individuals (Smith et al., 2009). Its flexibility allows for in-depth data to be collected along with further insights that may have not been forecasted (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Another important aspect of IPA is that the researcher's interpretation is also taken into account (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2011). Due to my own experiences with foster families, it is not possible for me to ignore my views. Therefore, such approach encouraged me as a researcher to immerse myself in the participants' context and understand their own interpretation of their life experiences, while avoiding my own influencing interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2009)

As I thought on my research question, the unique and life changing experience of fostering a child merits emphasis on one's lived experience and, for this reason, IPA was the best fit. More detail on the development of IPA is presented in the next section.

3.3.2 The development of IPA

The phenomenological movement was greatly influenced by the philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl elaborated on how understanding human experiences required exploration of one's interpretations of the experience without imposing a researcher's preconceptions or biases. He devised theoretical knowledge on how researchers attempted to achieve this through a series of 'reductions' which allowed different perspectives on a researched phenomenon. He also introduced the concept of 'bracketing' whereby the researchers segregated their own ideas, thus acknowledging that both the researcher and participant have their subjective understanding of the phenomena being researched (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger took this a step further, and

questioned whether information could ever be understood objectively since all individuals have an interpretative stance based on their own context and understanding of the world. Heidegger's perspective resonated with my early reflections about how I could have experienced different positions throughout this research due to my experience with foster families. Therefore, being mindful throughout the research allowed me to differentiate my understanding of the data from the participants' meanings.

3.3.3 The three philosophical tenets

IPA, which was founded by Smith and his colleagues in the mid-1990s (Smith J. A., 2004), is composed of three philosophical tenets, known as phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is the study on how people experience the world around them. IPA researchers use a phenomenological approach to seek how participants are making sense of their narrated experiences. This is done by paying special attention to the language used and to try to make sense of any underlying meanings (Willig, 2013). For this research, adopting such perspective was necessary as it facilitated the emergence of foster carers' unique perspectives in their transition to learning parental roles for the first time.

Hermeneutics is known to be the study of interpretation. IPA addresses two types of interpretations, those of the participants as well as those of the researcher and this was explained with the term 'double hermeneutics' (Smith et al., 2009). This notion was key in acknowledging the two processes in which participants narrate experienced life events in their own interpretation, while, as a researcher, I too was forming my interpretation of the information I was receiving. This awareness was important to ensure that emerging results reflected the participants' perspectives.

The third major factor of IPA Is Idiography which focuses on bringing out the unique experiences of each participant. This is achieved by in-depth exploration of how an individual makes sense of a life experience and by considering whether there have been any other factors that shaped this understanding. This tenet was also important to acknowledge, since the individual experiences of participating couples when fostering a child were not necessarily always similar.

My role as a social worker allowed me to connect with different foster family set-ups, and therefore, the recruitment of participants was an important process of this study.

3.4 Research Participants

A qualitative approach prioritizes the quality of the emerging data over the number of participants (Willig, 2013). Since IPA strives towards an in-depth understanding of a researched phenomenon, this can only be achieved through a small sample (Smith & Osborn, 2009) which allows for more comprehensive analysis to be carried out (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) argue that a sample size between three to six participants is reasonable for a student who opts to use IPA. In this study, three couples were interviewed, forming a total of six participants.

A criterion sampling technique was implemented (Creswell, 2007) whereby applicants needed to meet the below criteria:

- Heterosexual couples living together.
- Did not have any biological children of their own.
- Learned parental roles for the first time through the process of fostering a child.
- Must have been fostering for at least one year.

As favoured in IPA, in order to achieve a homogenous sample (Smith & Eatough, 2011) I opted to study heterosexual couples. However, this also implied that valuable information about other foster family types, such as same sex couples or single applicants, were excluded, and therefore referred to as a future recommendation for further study.

Table 1. outlines the participants of this study, reflecting ranges for their age, duration of couple relationship, as well as the number and ages of fostered children in their care. Their identities have been pseudonomised.

Table 1

Table of Participants

Participants	Ages	Length of couple relationship	Years of fostering experience	No of children fostered	Age range of foster children
Natasha & Charles	Late 40s	29 years	13	3	Over 9 years old
Romina & Nicholas	Early 40s	26 years	7	2	Over 7 years old
Joan & Stephen	Early 40s	22 years	10	2	Over 10 years old

3.5 Recruitment Process

The Fostering Service within The Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) follows all foster carers in Malta who are licenced by the fostering board. Since I am employed as a social worker within that same service, it was requested by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) that I sought out gatekeepers who were impartial to the

system. Hence, I communicated with National Foster Care Association Malta which is a local agency that strives to ‘work with all those involved in fostering in order to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people’ (NFCAM, 2023). In my communication with the agency, the scope of the study was explained, as well as what was expected out of participants. My professional role within the Fostering Service was also made explicit. The information sheet and consent forms (Appendices A & B) were also provided to the gatekeeper so that potential participants were able to access detailed information about the study, allowing them to take an informed decision prior to their participation.

Potential participants who fit the criteria and were interested in taking part in the research contacted me directly. During the initial contact which took place through a phonecall, I introduced myself and explained the aim of the study, whilst answering any queries. Upon confirmation of interest, we proceeded to discuss availabilities that were most convenient for the couple interview.

During the first appointment, we discussed and signed the information sheet and consent forms, after which the first interview was carried out. This was audio-recorded and transcribed. Follow-up appointments for the individual interviews were scheduled at the end of our first joint interview.

3.6 Data Collection

3.6.1. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study. These are most commonly used in qualitative research (Willig, 2013) since they allow a degree of freedom for participants to express themselves, whilst allowing the researcher to deepen the context by probing further to

generate rich data that captures these unique life experiences (Bryman, 2012). Adopting this structure allowed me to guide the direction of the interview rather than dictate it (Smith et al., 2009) as foster carers provided their insights based on what was most pertinent to their own transition to parenthood. During moments that seemed to deviate from the research question I refocused gently the direction of the interview (Willig, 2013; Smith & Osborn, 2009).

Since there is a gap in literature about the research topic, this flexibility was beneficial as it also allowed participants to enrich the emerging data with what was most pertinent to them.

3.6.2 Interview Guide

An interview schedule (Appendix C) guided the interview process. Questions were informed by the literature that was reviewed, whereby the main emphasis for the chosen questions aimed at addressing the research question.

Apart from joint interviews, individual interviews helped to honour the individual experiences of both parents in the participating couple. This allowed me to acquire an in-depth insight on how each individual evaluated their transitionary experience to parenthood and the impact it had on their couple relationship.

3.6.2 Conducting the Interview

Following participants' consent, interviews were initiated whereby each one lasted around one-and-a-half hours. A common occurrence I experienced was managing a sense of overriding roles. Even though I was aware that I fulfilled the researcher's role, during sensitive moments, I often found myself reverting towards a therapeutic stance since my

growing ability as a trainee therapist is also a significant part of my own identity (Sammur Scerri et al., 2012).

My professional role as a social worker in the fostering service enhanced my ability to be more attuned with the participants' expressed emotions and experiences. Such a phenomenon is known as the insider perspective (Smith et al., 2009) as it helped me feel more equipped to understand their explanations, whilst embracing a curious stance towards the participants' unique experiences was essential. After the interviews, participants were debriefed, checking in on their emotional wellbeing and engaging in a more relaxed conversation (Sammur Scerri et al., 2012).

3.7 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, a step that allowed me to begin immersing myself into the data and learn more about the unique perspectives participants have towards the studied phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).

When analysing transcripts I considered each participant's context, their nonverbals, as well as their choice of words in articulating their experiences. In the process of analysing each transcript, I listed down emergent themes from the data (Landridge, 2004). IPA further helped me to acknowledge that I too held hypotheses and opinions about the research topic. This awareness motivated me to take notes before and after interviews which later helped me understand my positioning when analysing emerging data. Such positions were discussed with my dissertation supervisor, and also taken up in supervision, allowing me to differentiate ideas that resonated with my own experience in the field, to those given by the research participants.

Moreover, reading each transcript multiple times allowed me to connect better with the participants' experiences. During this process, I made use of the right margin to note down my own reflections and the left margin to list down emerging themes (Smith & Osborn, 2009). I gave special attention to the latter to ensure that the articulation of themes truly reflected the participants' messages. In fact, while analysing the data, I also marked important quotes that could have been used to further enhance the validity of emerging themes (Smith, 1996).

After analysing the first interview, I organised and made sense of the data gathered through the formulation of emerging subordinate and superordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2009), which was further developed when analysing subsequent interviews.

3.8 Strategies to ensure credibility and trustworthiness

It was of utmost importance to ensure that emerging data from this study would be credible and trustworthy. I worked in collaboration with my thesis supervisor who helped me throughout the process of this research. Moreover, I discussed my positioning as a researcher with my systemic supervisor, who acted as a peer reviewer through her challenging and questioning my hypotheses (Creswell, 2007). Moreover, taking personal notes of my thoughts before and after interviews allowed me to 'bracket' my own position/s throughout the analysis phase.

Being explicit of my own position/s helped create the opportunity to reduce biased interpretations, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the research (Wong & Ng, 2008). This was especially important to me since, considering my day-to-day role working with foster families, I was conscious that it was not possible for me to maintain a completely neutral stance. A key factor that contributed towards being credible and trustworthy was that of

maintaining a curious stance towards the participants' unique narratives (White & Epston, 1989), whilst also adopting a therapeutic stance when there was the need to focus more deeply into emotions (Johnson, 2019).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The nature of the study sought to obtain information which was sensitive and personal, therefore, importance was given to being ethically considerate. At the very least, I wanted participants to feel at ease and ensure that the time which they offered was out of their own free will. In discussing the information sheet and consent form before initiating interviews, I was able to receive this assurance when they signed. Moreover, participants knew that they could opt out at any point and that they were also not obliged to answer questions which made them feel uncomfortable.

It was made clear to participants that, although I am employed within the Fostering Service, all emerging information remained strictly confidential and used for the sole purpose of the research. Furthermore, only myself as researcher, had access to the digital files and transcripts. These were safeguarded on a password protected laptop until the thesis review, after which data was to be erased.

Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity. Only if the participants asked for me to liaise with their respective social worker for further support would I have communicated with other professionals within the service.

Throughout the interviews, I used my experience with foster families and my knowledge as a trainee family therapist to slow down and zoom into the participants' experienced emotions while providing a warm and accepting atmosphere (Johnson, 2019). As

mentioned in section 3.6.2, at the end of an interview, I dedicated some time to explore and hold the participant's emotions, and gently shift towards a more casual conversation.

3.10 Reflexivity

Amongst many reflections, there have been two main areas that resonated with me the most. These were in the role I fulfil as a fostering social worker, and also that of being in my current stage in the lifecycle (McGoldrick, 2016) whereby I am moving towards the transition to marriage and life together with my fiancée.

In working with foster carers, I have developed a sense of compassion and admiration towards them. While my professional role amplified my ability to hypothesise, I was more tempted to 'assume' certain emotions that participants may have been experiencing. Through the use of supervision and attentiveness to my own position/s (Rober, 2021), I was able to embrace a 'not knowing position' (Anderson, 2005) and remain genuinely curious towards the participants' own experiences and emotions.

When considering my own phase in the lifecycle, I often have discussions with my fiancée whereby we would share how beautiful it would be to begin a family of our own and hopefully expand the members within it. During such discussions we would also think about the responsibilities and challenges such a transition may entail. This leaves me feeling fascinated by couples who learn to fulfil parenting roles, whilst simultaneously adapting towards the unique roles of being a foster carer which I have come to appreciate through my professional role. This admiration helps me to appreciate the resilience and obstacles that foster carers need to overcome in the process of caring for children in need. In such a context, I feel that the implementation of IPA has been particularly helpful to me to be more attentive towards my own processes, whilst striving to acknowledge the researcher in me as part of the

process in obtaining data, rather than remaining impartial to this information (Smith et al., 2009).

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed outlook on the research design, data collection, the process of analysing data, implementations to sustain credibility and trustworthiness, as well as ethical considerations involved. In the following chapter, the emergent findings are presented.

Chapter 4 – Findings

4.1 Introduction

The couples who participated in this study provided unique insights about their transition of becoming first time parental figures through fostering. This chapter presents the findings from the interviews.

I shall briefly present the participants, followed by a table of superordinate and sub-themes (Table 2.). These themes have been meticulously formulated through the analysis of nine interviews; I shall then expand each theme individually. In order to assure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used and information which can identify participants has been changed or excluded.

4.2 Presentation of Participants

All three couples were over forty years old, involved in employment, and have been in a relationship for a minimum of twenty years. Their narrated experiences were a rich source of information since the duration of which they have fostered children ranged between seven to thirteen years in total. Moreover, each couple fostered at least two or more children throughout the years.

4.3 Table of Themes

Table 2 presents the superordinate themes and subthemes derived from the in-depth analysis of the nine original transcripts of this research.

Table 2

Emergent themes following data analysis of transcribed interviews.

Superordinate themes		Sub-themes	
4.4	Parenting as a Life Purpose	4.4.1	Infertility
		4.4.2	Considering adoption
		4.4.3	The couple's joint decision to parent through fostering
4.5	Pandora's Box	4.5.1	An emotional journey which necessitates a strong couple relationship
		4.5.2	Journey towards a unique transition
		4.5.3	A change requiring flexibility and new routines
4.6	Parenting Plus	4.6.1	The joy in fulfilling a parental role for the first time
		4.6.2	Adapting to a new and unique parenting role
		4.6.3	Discovering one's parenting style
		4.6.4	Complexities of parenting a foster child
4.7	A Therapeutic Endeavour	4.7.1	Therapeutic Parenting
		4.7.2	Taking over another's parenting
4.8	A Difficult but Fulfilling Journey	4.8.1	The ups and downs of parenting through fostering
		4.8.2	Impact on self and the relationship
		4.8.3	An experienced lack of sensitivity
		4.8.4	Caring for the child of another
4.9	The Support Needed	4.9.1	Essential support, cooperation and help
		4.9.2	The support needed to fulfil the parenting role better

4.4 Parenting as a Life Purpose

A common ideology amongst all three couples was that they envisaged parenthood as a life purpose. Charles explained that parenthood *'is like a human instinct'* (p.3) and, for Stephen, this next chapter in life *'seems to come naturally'* (p.2). Natasha's *'wish to become a parent was always there, meaning that it has always been one of life's main purposes'* (p.1). For Romina *'this was our dream'* (p.8), whilst Nicholas added that *'the scope was towards creating a family as we always wanted one'* (p.1).

4.4.1 Infertility

As couples who deeply valued the parent role, they were unfortunate to have faced difficulties in having children of their own, which was described as traumatic. Stephen explained: *'we went to doctors who gave us medicine and we explored different options. We spent months, which then turned to years'* (p.1). He added: *'My mind wasn't there. I tried to keep on going with life. However, it's tough to have a plan and then everything vanishes into nothing. The sense of purpose changed in the blink of an eye'* (Stephen, p.1). Natasha expressed that: *'not having biological children was a tragedy to me'* (p.30). Similarly, Romina stated: *'It wasn't easy at all. It was very difficult and, if we were not strong, we would have collapsed'* (p.2).

It was a very difficult and long process for the couples to come to terms with infertility. Natasha narrated: *'In this situation, it took a long time for us to decide what we were going to do and to come to terms that we were not going to have our own children. Ten years passed since our marriage'* (p.5). An interesting experience for Natasha, Stephen and Joan was that seeking alternative routes was healing to them. For instance, Stephen spoke about how their contact with a child in a residential home seemed to be *'good therapy for my*

wife, and also for myself! She seemed happy and her moods changed as well' (p.2). Natasha reflected upon her journey as a foster mother and '*when looking back, there was a lot of healing. Seeing the children healing from their trauma ended up healing my own traumatic experience!*' (Natasha, p.30).

4.4.2 Considering adoption

After coming to terms with infertility, two out of the three couples considered adoption, however this was not straightforward. Romina explained: '*When we were in the problem, he used to tell me that we should approach adoption. However, I was still laid back*' (p.2). Moreover, the process to adopt a child was not easy as it was expensive and involved foreign countries. For instance, Stephen stated: '*We were qualified to adopt a child. Then when we were informed about what the process would entail, and the money needed. But this was going to be difficult. We were still paying the home loan...financially it was not ideal*' (p.2). The other couple, Natasha and Charles, had already spoken about fostering before, while Natasha explained that: '*Charles was clear in thinking that he did not wish to adopt, especially since it would involve adopting from a foreign country*' (p.5). Similarly, after seeking more information, Nicholas and Romina were also interested to support local children and Nicholas stated that '*there is a great need for this in Malta*' (p.8).

4.4.3 The couple's joint decision to parent through fostering

A common opinion amongst all couples was that the path of becoming a parent through fostering should not be a solution to solve the trauma of infertility. In fact, Charles commented: '*I think that one would be mistaken to enter fostering with the thought that it would solve the lack of children or the need to become a parent*' (p.34). Natasha added:

'First, they must have worked on the issue of not being able to have children of their own, otherwise it would be tough! I think that it wouldn't be beneficial to yourself and neither to the children. You must picture the idea that, in fostering, there is a lot of uncertainty, especially in the beginning' (Natasha, p.32)

This consideration was important since *'you cannot expect these children to act as if they are yours'* (Natasha, p.33). The role of fostering incorporates providing a safe space for these children to heal from their trauma. Their behaviour may be a manifestation of unspoken pain. Therefore, foster carers must have worked on their own trauma to be in a better position to attend to the child's unique needs.

Due to fast-paced life, Natasha admitted: *'If we had our own children, I doubt that we would have called to share our interest'* (p.31). However, this was a path they had discussed in the past, and Charles stated: *'We always used to say that, if we had the chance, we would go for fostering. It was always an option'* (p.6). After being married for ten years, Natasha explained that: *'I saw the opportunity to parent through other routes and I did not give up on the idea of parenting through fostering'* (p.1).

Romina and Nicholas' story was a little different. After a difficult phase...

'I called Appogg to proceed with the course in adoption. A person called back explaining that she wishes to speak to them about fostering. We met her; we spoke as a couple, and said 'Why not?'' (Romina, p.3)

This couple felt drawn to support vulnerable children within this society and therefore they felt inclined to approach fostering instead of adoption.

For Joan and Stephen, the idea of fostering emerged after consistently visiting a four-year-old boy, Daniel, who resided in a residential home. Joan explained: *'I did not know what fostering was. No idea! First, we started the process in adoption, but it was complicated. Then we started taking out Daniel on outings' (p.1)*. Wishing to increase their time with Daniel, they discovered the possibility to foster. *'We did not know exactly what it meant and what it involves. Then we asked and gathered more information' (Stephen, p.3)*.

All three couples agreed in having a strong foundation within the couple relationship before beginning this fostering journey. This requires plenty of discussion since *'this is a decision that is surely shared together. It is a common investment which makes part of both individuals' (Natasha, p.3)*. Romina expressed:

'It's important that there is a discussion between the individuals. If someone has any doubt, it would be best to think it twice, otherwise there would be problems with the first emerging problem. The foundation needs to be strong'
(Romina, p.12)

4.5 Pandora's Box

Fostering is a unique journey which is comparable to 'Pandora's Box'. *'It's difficult to plan ahead' (Natasha, p.11)*. When speaking about her foster children, Romina explained:

'You never saw them before, you know nothing about them. It's a closed box. You don't know what you're going to face and how you're going to meet their arising needs' (Romina, p.1).

She elaborated that *'there is an ocean between the facts and what you would have heard'* (Romina, p.1) and Nicholas added that, with all the complexities, *'you need to live the experience day by day'* (p.2).

4.5.1 An emotional journey which necessitates a strong couple relationship

The journey resembles an emotional rollercoaster whereby, initially, Romina stated that *'we were looking forward and excited! There isn't even a word that can describe it'* (p.1). The emotional roller coaster sped up when Romina described their unique experience:

'We were already waiting to welcome a newborn in the span of two months. We were prepared, but then felt disheartened [with the change of plans]. When we received a call about another case, I wouldn't say that we were overwhelmed, but shocked, that from one child it became two, and there even was a push for the third one' (Romina, p.1)'

Unexpected changes in the transition plan elicited several emotions, impacting each individual differently. For instance, Romina's husband shared: *'I told her multiple times that we should also foster the middle child. My eyes shed tears'* (Nicholas, p.7). In fact, the couple disagreed about this in the beginning, needing lots of discussion and planning within a short time frame.

Living with the unknown was a common experience for all three couples. Joan expressed how this negatively impacted her wellbeing:

'I became more nervous. I had to suppress everything, feeling anxious. It's as if you don't know where you stand with the child; today he is here and tomorrow he may not be' (Joan, p.6)

She added that *'it would be best to avoid stepping into fostering if you feel that you won't be able to give them back'* (Joan, p.12). While Romina mentioned that *'there has always been a fear that the children can go back and there still is. I would be lying if I tell you that there isn't'* (p.6). Natasha and Charles experienced a short-term placement at the very beginning, and even though they were prepared, the child's departure still left a mark.

'She was here for only a week. We knew that it was going to be for a short duration, however, I was in a bad state after she left. Perhaps, it was because she was a baby. I felt it a lot, I was heartbroken, I could not stand seeing her leave. I still think about her!' (Natasha, p.14)

Uncertainty is a difficult burden carried by foster carers *'especially before permanency is granted. Every six months we did not know what the board may decide'* (Charles, p.10). Such burden and emotions called for a strong couple relationship:

'I think that the couple relationship is the most important aspect. If there isn't a strong couple relationship, with the problems that these children bring with them, it is very easy to split' (Romina, p.14)

4.5.2 Journey towards a unique transition

Romina and Nicholas approached the transition quite cautiously. *'We kept all the information to the people closest to us. Our friends and work colleagues didn't know anything'* (p.1). This was not just the story of two vulnerable children being fostered, but also the story of a couple who suffered the pain of not being able to have their own biological children.

'He was so happy that he had tears in his eyes! It was our dream. We were yearning for this moment. I started fostering at an age where I was already married for ten years, and not just after two weeks.' (Romina, p.7).

It's a transition that requires mental preparation as well. Charles shared: *'I was not expecting to live in the same way we used to. However, I think this change was natural'* (p.1). While Natasha expected change, she was surprised by the way her priorities shifted:

'This is a little overwhelming. It's as if you opened a door and you saw water coming from the other side. As soon as I opened this door, I did not have control over how much water enters' (Natasha, p.37).

'Routines changed, everyone played their part to ensure that things function well' (Charles, p.37). Welcoming a child to reside with them required practical preparations as well: *'We had rooms that were not yet ready and so, we made the necessary arrangements to furnish them'* (Charles, p.1).

Anticipation for a child came with the option to choose the age of the child. *'The only condition was that, since childcare was not yet popular, we sought a child who is three years or older so that he or she can go to kinder'* (Natasha, p.11). Charles' experience about this was that since *'she was not a baby, and we hadn't asked for one, most things that we used to do, such as going out, we were still able to do. Therefore, it wasn't that difficult to adapt'* (p.11)

Similarly, Joan and Stephen also considered to foster a child who was already six years old. This was after they spent two years visiting him and taking him out of the residence. *'Therefore, contact happened more quickly, those bits of the process were already complete'* (Stephen, p.5). However, their second transition was a newborn, and the transition was drastically different and abrupt. Stephen recalled how *'it was raining all day and we kept*

on waiting till eight in the evening' (p.14). In comparison to their first transition, 'it was not easy! Even though you'd give him a bottle, he would scream so loud. I didn't even know what I could do. I did not even know how to prepare his food yet!' (Joan, p.5).

A common attitude was in becoming fully committed. *'When you enter the role, you either go for it, otherwise you should not take up the role as a foster parent' (Romina, p.5).*

Natasha also expressed that *'I entered with the mindset to accept and remain their parent no matter what they do' (Natasha, p.21).* Joan also stated that: *'It's a nice experience. In your eyes, you're not going to see the child as a fostered child. What I would have done with my own son, I am doing with him. I have invested myself completely in him' (p.3).*

4.5.3 A change requiring flexibility and new routines

Becoming a first-time parent requires adjustment, and doing this through fostering doesn't make it any easier! *'The way we lived at home changed a lot, it did not remain in the way we lived as a couple' (Charles, p.21).* This was *'because of logistics and in the way you need to adapt to a new situation as a family' (Charles, p.1).*

An interesting observation was made by Charles' wife: *'I think that he was challenged in the emotional aspect. It was already a challenge for him when we were as a couple to show his emotions' (Natasha, p.22).* Then she elaborated:

'When children came, apart from having myself pestering him that these [emotional aspects] are important, the children innocently would go to him, hug him, and expect him to loosen up a little. This seemed to place him in a situation that 'now even they need....' But I think that with children it was easier, meaning that he managed to build really good relationship with the children' (Natasha, p.22)

This situation creates a sudden shift in priorities and *'it is difficult until you get used to it. It is difficult because you would have got used to living one way and would have to start from scratch, because first you think about the children then about yourself'* (Nicholas, p.3). Romina adds: *'Obviously, before, we were more flexible. We were free to do and go where we pleased'* (p.15). For Stephen, *'it took a year until I started to settle. It was as if a bomb fell on me. I needed to find balance between the new circumstances and my character'* (p.4). His wife, Joan, explained: *'I was going to reduce work hours to pick him up from school. We spent around a year and a half [settling down] but then things start falling into place'* (p.2). Nonetheless settling down required lots of energy and flexibility for all foster carers, especially until they found a working system.

4.6 Parenting Plus

This truly is a unique transition especially since *'you go through experiences that are not exactly as if you had your own children as a parent'* (Natasha, p.31). *'You cannot consider this as normal parenting'* (Charles, p.26) since the children carry their own burdens of trauma. *'You cannot expect from these children as if they had everything from day one!'* (Natasha, p.33). *'These children create more challenges than usual due to what they experienced'* (Natasha, p.22).

4.6.1 The joy in fulfilling a parental role for the first time

Fulfilling this newly found role was very meaningful. *'Becoming a parent was the way how we completed the chain because we both wished to have a family. I did not feel the change as much because we were prepared for this'* (Romina, p.3-4).

'The children brought lots of joy' (Natasha, p.5) and *'it's as if they fill in your home'* (Joan, p.17). *'It's nice to return home and see them coming to give you a hug, or when they call you 'mum' or 'dad''* (Nicholas, p.4). Getting to know the child *'inside out'* (Natasha, p.12) infuses the parent role.

The adult-child connection was enhanced when the couple witnessed the children's vulnerability and yearning for care. This often demonstrated itself through physical affection, such as: *'every time he came with us, he grabbed my hand'* (Stephen, p.3).

4.6.2 Adapting to a new and unique parenting role

Prior to immersing themselves in their parental roles as the foster carers of these children, at the beginning, *'there would be a nice honeymoon phase'* (Charles p.17). *'We took it slowly, depending on the needs of the children as they grew up. It's automatic and you must adapt to different circumstances'* (Romina, p.9).

The bond grew stronger as the children's strengths started to shine: *'She had such a strong and nice personality that, to me, it was like a dream come true because we really bonded well together'* (Natasha, p.29). Parenting through fostring brought different expectations for Natasha: *'I would have expected more out of them if they were mine. I think that parenting in this way has brought out in me a more understanding and accepting parent, than if I had my own biological children'* (p.15).

The parenting role helped glue the couples together in some cases, it *'definitely requires teamwork'* (Nicholas, p.6). *'Obviously we are going to have our differences, however, it helped us get closer and gave us a strength in knowing our primary role for this girl that came with us'* (Natasha, p.25). The journey was described as *'so long that you end up strengthening the relationship as well as your character'* (Romina, p.8).

Even after years, all couples expressed that they needed to keep on adapting towards the children's unique needs. *'They still suffer from the effects of what they went through. Therefore, from a fostering perspective, you have a greater satisfaction because you would be able to say: 'look where we have arrived!''* (Charles, p.8).

4.6.3 Discovering one's parenting style

The discovery of their parenting styles and applied values were influenced by their own upbringings. Stephen expressed that *'I wanted to follow the footsteps of my father and maybe even of my grandparents. I used several methods that they used with me'* (p.4). Moreover, Romina shared that *'I try to pass on the values I have learned from my own upbringing to these children'* (p.11).

All the couples experienced their parental role differently and, therefore, *'there are things that we do not agree upon, even in our ways of parenting'* (Charles, p.9). However, Joan emphasized the importance of *'giving in sometimes. It was not easy, since we are both hardheaded!'* (p.10).

4.6.4 Complexities of parenting a foster child

Apart from regular parenting struggles, *'there are things which make you realise that you are not parenting alone in fostering. There are other influential factors'* (Natasha, p.32).

A topic which was frequently brought up was that of SAVs (Supervised Access Visits), which is the time when foster children meet with their biological families. Several frustrations were raised, highlighting their potential negative impact on the child. Particularly concerning was when SAVs took place frequently, three times a week for instance. Besides

their disruption, Nicholas added that *'their characters change completely! They would not be the same children'* (p.19).

Such complexities required that these couples adapted their own parental strategies to meet the fostered children's fluctuating needs. Sometimes they also faced restrictions in being foster carers which *'is different from being a biological parent'* (Natasha, p.10).

'There were moments when I started to give up because I gave this such a priority. I made all these sacrifices, if she needed, I would take her to the best psychiatrist, and still, with all these complexities, there will be situations where she won't get the best' (Natasha, p.10).

4.7 A Therapeutic Endeavour

4.7.1 Therapeutic Parenting

Fostering is not considered normal parenting because *'we have to understand that they experienced trauma'* (Romina, p.7). Parenting a child therapeutically is no easy task, whereas regular parenting was not considered enough to meet the children's unique needs. Stephen explained: *'I started to evaluate my own actions with these children since they've been through violence. You must be attentive about what you say and do in front of them'* (p.5). Charles and Natasha also elaborated:

'I think that they had to recover emotionally, all three of them had lots of needs. Fortunately, they found Natasha who, for instance, the time spent before bedtime was very important because they would open up a lot, and even during moments they felt lost' (Charles, p.27).

‘With these children, the number one goal is that they are happy as children and that they will grow up with the potential to be happy adults. That is a huge achievement for them after having had a setback in their early years’ (Natasha p.16).

Healing from past trauma *‘takes years, and there are things which I think they still suffer from because of what they went through’* (Charles, p.8). These parents witnessed the children change their moods rapidly, and sometimes they would need someone to help them verbalise their emotions. For instance, Nicholas narrated: *‘Sometimes we sit together, and I would tell them: ‘Let us speak for a little while because it’s not possible that yesterday you were happy and today you are like this’’* (p.12). Parenting children whose moods and behaviours fluctuate, often without a logical explanation, is no easy task. Remaining calm and composed is seen as vital for Natasha: *‘He [Charles] rarely ever loses control, and I think that this is something very positive for the children. This is something I admire in him as a parent’* (p.22).

Moreover, these parents also supported foster children in their identity formation. Having a safe level of transparency was considered helpful: *‘Our conversations have always been clear, that there are two families involved. The three children have always grown up with this knowledge’* (Natasha, p.13).

4.7.2 Taking over another’s parenting

Another unique factor is that, in essence, foster carers are tasked to take over another’s parenting. There would have been strong grounds to why the children were removed from their biological family and, therefore these couples often received children in quite a bad state.

'Can I use the word? Shock! In fact, I do not even have photos. I deleted everything! There were so many physical needs that...it's not that I do not wish to remember, because they are still at the back of my mind...but...that in this country there are children living in these circumstances...you wouldn't even realise' (Romina, p.10).

Severe situations are indicators of multiple social difficulties and, due to fear, Joan expressed: *'I used to be attentive to avoid meeting them' (p.5)*. Despite these factors, Natasha shared: *'in spite of their difficulties and decisions, I couldn't even begin to imagine the feelings experienced by the biological parents during the moment their children were taken away from them' (p.13).*

This empathic stance introduced the idea that, when possible, creating a good relationship with the biological family was beneficial. In fact, after establishing a positive connection with the birth family of one of their foster children, Joan stated: *'I think that you have to accept their families' (p.13)*. Romina also shared her experience:

'We have a good relationship. There are times when we took her out with her mother; even during birthdays, we would bake a cake and invite her mum, grandmother and aunts...however this all must take place within boundaries' (Romina, p.6).

Including the biological family in conversations was seen to help the children in their identity formation. *'I always told them that I was not the one to give them life. Mummy gave her contribution and gave you life' (Natasha, p. 17)*. In realising that she took over this mother's parenting, she also thought that it would be helpful to try and support her situation as well: *'And when she had her baby, I used to send her a packet of nappies, a body wash for*

her; and some items that she might not buy for herself such as deodorant...She used to appreciate this a lot' (Natasha, p.17).

4.8 A Difficult but Fulfilling Journey

4.8.1 The ups and downs of parenting through fostering

'If you are not ready for this trouble...I ended up with lots of anxiety, stomach burns. Now we are more settled. The chance of him remaining here have always grew. But this was hard. This was my case but, perhaps, other situations are not like this' (Joan, p.12).

As Joan described, the path of becoming a parent through fostering can be very demanding, however, *'It is still worth it!'* (Joan, p.12). Stephen admitted that *'something that bothered me was the shouting. Both of them. Maaa! I couldn't stand it'* (p.25). However, Joan added that *'you like them because they are sweet. The love that they show you is just something...'* (p.25).

Problems and satisfaction co-exist in all of the foster carer's narrated experiences. For instance: *'It is not plain sailing but it's nice and of great satisfaction. I would do it again for a hundred times'* (Romina, p.20). Satisfaction was felt especially when they witnessed the child's progress. *'I enjoy seeing him play the piano. I often say that he is excelling at something that, if he remained where he was, this wouldn't even have been possible'* (Charles, p.7). Charles was not just referring to progress in academic aspects, but also in *'relationships, friendships, ability to communicate with children and how they express themselves'* (p.12). Romina further adds: *'I feel comfortable to say that all that she knows today is because we taught it to her. What more can I want in life?'* (p.14).

Although it's fulfilling, Nicholas reminds himself that the children *'are not ours, you must be attentive in what you do because if you make a mistake...'* (p.7). Joan admitted:

'I was always worried about what they were going to say and whether Appogg would make a report about me. Sometimes the child is going to fall and get bruised. This is something common. I worry that they might think it is a hit' (p.7).

In addition to these worries, there is also the factor that children may lie. For instance, Romina explained:

'I have one problem with the children, a big one though! That they lie excessively, and this terrifies me. Although we are attending counselling, this situation keeps me on an edge. It could be that, randomly, she invents something, and this would create a situation' (Romina, p.7).

4.8.2 Impact on self and the relationship

Caring for a child for their first time impacted the lifestyle and routines of all couples. Romina expressed that *'obviously, the relationship was impacted'* (p.9) and Charles expressed that *'we have less time for each other and also less time to ourselves'* (p.37). Natasha, however, shared a positive comment:

'It has enriched it. The fact that, when they are young and, for instance, you would take them to a feast. Even if you don't like them much, I would see him [Charles] carrying them on his back. It brings out these aspects of a person's personality. Parenting brought out aspects of his personality that I think wouldn't have been brought out' (Natasha, p.23).

Natasha also feels that *'since the children arrived, I became more mature with motherhood'* (p. 24). Joan shared a bit of both worlds: *'He became more nervous, however, he started doing things the he did not do before. He became more playful. Stephen enjoys making the children happy'* (p.8). Stephen admitted that, before this transition, *'we were more tranquil'* (Stephen, p.22) and in *'having less time to speak, arguments increased. There are more things to keep up with'* (Joan, p.9).

This evolving situation required the couples to seek better ways in managing conflict, especially when having children at home. They realised that these children depended on them and that their conflict may influence their wellbeing. *'Although we would be angry, we would both think about it and find the best way forward'* (Romina, p.12). Charles added that *'the more exaggerated you perceive a situation, the more problematic it would be to find a solution'* (p.41).

Communication was a key tool highlighted by all couples, despite having significantly less time together. Even with limited time, Nicholas shared how *'sometimes she leaves for work and, on the way there, she would call me to discuss different matters'* (p.15). On top of everything, Natasha summarised that *'apart from the relationship as parents, it is very important that time is found for the couple's relationship'* (p.40).

4.8.3 An experienced lack of sensitivity

All couples expressed displeasure in the way the system sometimes assumes their motives. They felt that they were in a unique position to understand the needs of the child better, however, they often found hurdles when trying to voice these out. Natasha expressed pain in the way they were told *'you made her yours because you don't have your own'* (p.25). Charles elaborated:

'Every week we would send an update on what is happening at home, what happens after access...this created a lot of stress, and you'd wish to arrive somewhere with this. However, since they were not believing us, the damage is going to continue growing' (Charles, p.26).

Natasha was pained to *'see the girl return back defeated after access'* p.10. Joan too shared that *'they [supervisors for access] sometimes spent an hour behind our door to drag him out. I would bottle up my worries, awaiting to see how access turned out and to see the state he would return back in'* (p.7). This led Natasha to *'remind myself that I need to be more attentive in the way I present certain information because it could be misinterpreted'* (p.28). She further elaborated, *'you feel left out and that your role as a parent is not being respected. You are just being treated as one of the people who provide the services for this child'* (Natasha, p.11).

Charles even compared the stress of parenting to managing the complexities of fostering: *'We knew what we were going in for and we did not give up. Therefore, the fear is more about this thing rather than because you're going to welcome a newborn or a child'* (p.3). All couples felt that parenting children with trauma is already a tough task, therefore, other hurdles within the system were seen as extra. *'I think that the biggest drawback we still face today, that frustrates me, is the process to go abroad. It is something that I could not stand'* (Romina, p.15). She shared how this does not make her feel trusted, despite taking full responsibility of the children's basic, medical and educational needs. Nicholas expressed that regular parenting seems *'completely different. If you want, you can take a step on your own and not depend on someone else for everything'* (p.11).

Unfortunately, Joan and Stephen also expressed displeasure in the hurdles they faced by the system with their second foster child, whereby Stephen described this as a *'constant*

battle' (p.11). Moreover, Charles also added that sometimes the system *'expects that you are always strong'* (p.24) and this contributed to his idea of there being a lack of support.

4.8.4 Caring for the child of another

The couples' transition into parenting the child/ren of another makes the experience distinct. Natasha explained that *'even if children are not blood related, it doesn't mean that you can't parent them'* (p.2). After immersing herself in the role, Joan expressed how *'In your eyes you're not going to see them as foster children, but as your own children'* (p.21). This then leads to taking up the role of the protector: *'I will protect her with all my might. Not just because it was my first experience as a parent, but also because of where she was coming from'* (Natasha, p.5).

An interesting perspective shared by Natasha was:

'I think that no one else is in a better position to offer to the full, with openness and energy, to care for other people's children as much as someone who doesn't have his own children. I think that we are able to give them this much because of the fact that we did not have our own children!' (Natasha, p.31-32)

The couples' experience as first-time parents through fostering elicited in them the need to ensure that these children end up having a better life situation when they grow up.

'Your efforts are to try and support these unfortunate children from remaining in the same situation. You try and give them the opportunity to be complete adults' (Charles, p.10).

Romina added that *'although they hurt me sometimes, and I would cry and feel bad about it, I still ask myself: 'But if I hadn't taken this step, what would have happened to these children?'* (p.21). *'At least, they would be in a better position than their parents to take better care of themselves'* (Natasha, p.16).

Finally, as adults who envisaged themselves as parents but experienced difficulties, and as children who required a safe parent figure, the use of nomenclature by the children is one of the ultimate signs that fulfilling a fatherly or motherly role was achieved. For Natasha, when Sally first called her ‘mummy’: *‘It was beautiful! Despite her knowing, and I too, that I am not her natural mother’* (p.14).

4.9 The Support Needed

4.9.1 Essential support, cooperation, and help

One of the most fundamental support systems was found within the couple sub-system. *‘Your partner’s support remains very important’* (Natasha, p.27) and *‘you must work together otherwise it’s over’* (Charles, p.14). Joan admitted: *‘Having different skills sets helped us’* (p.4), *‘I didn’t even know how to do a nappy and I was fortunate to have Stephen’* (Joan, p.14). Romina also expressed:

‘If there isn’t cooperation between the couple, nothing will happen. You must be like a chain. The children are add-ons to the chain, however, the chain must function between ourselves’ (Romina, p.10)

Support from one’s family was also seen as essential: *‘We always found help, sometimes from her parents and sometimes from mine’* (Stephen, p.11). Romina also cherished the support she received from her mother in-law:

‘She always backed us up. As soon as I would call, she would escape whatever she was doing. She lives far from here, but she would still come here even if she had to catch a bus. She is the person that helped us the most in reality’ (Romina, p.10).

One must also consider that, as time passes, this support system may fade:

'My mum was stronger back then, obviously this was twelve years ago when she was still in her sixties. However, now, my mother is seventy-eight years old. She used to help us more back then than she could now' (Natasha, p.42).

Having hands on support is also essential since, *'in cases of emergency, there needs to be that one person that can give you practical support, sometimes even some help around the house'* (Romina, p.10). Joan added that *'my friends supported me a lot. At the beginning I didn't even have a t-shirt!'* then she received lots of items to support their transition to welcome a newborn.

A distinction was also made between 'formal and informal support systems'. Charles and Natasha expressed that there were times when the formal support system was helpful since *'their social workers were supportive'* (Charles, p.43), while the continuity of having the same social worker for a long period of time helped. An informal support system was also considered as important:

'Be it a counsellor or a spiritual director, at least you know that you can go and speak with this person and let out your feelings without feeling judged. Perhaps, you may not do this with the formal support system in fear that they may question your ability to foster, there is this uncertainty' (Natasha, p.45).

4.9.2 The support needed to fulfil the parenting role better

'There was a time when I went to therapy to take care of myself because, often, in all of this chaos, I needed to process things' (Natasha, p.29). Therapeutic support was considered

beneficial as described by Charles: *'we would disagree over so many things that we needed to seek help from professionals'* (p.16).

4.10 Conclusion

Through the participants' voices, this chapter shed light on their unique lived experiences in transitioning to parenthood through fostering. The next chapter discusses the findings in relation to existing literature.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This study aimed at shedding light on the unique transition of couples who became first time parents through fostering. The findings are discussed and reflected around two main phases of this life-changing experience.

Initially, I shall delve into the time before the couples transitioned into parenthood, whereby they experienced an emotional rollercoaster through their difficult stories, up to the moment they considered fostering. I shall then proceed to interpret the participants' experiences when stepping into the world of parenting in conjunction with the added weight brought about through the context of fostering.

5.2 Before transitioning into parenthood

5.2.1 A yearning to become a parent

The wellbeing of Maltese families is influenced by a number of dynamic factors, but what remains constant is that a strong couple relationship is key to achieve the highest quality of life, satisfaction, and healthy parent-child relationships (Scerri et al., 2019). Having a strong relationship was paramount to all of the participants' journeys. Their couple relationship served as a solid foundation towards making life changing decisions, and this included their joint decision to consider expanding their family.

The couples expressed that, when settling down after marriage, they felt it natural to consider the transition into parenthood. There was also a sense of yearning to transition into this role and, in fact, both Natasha and Romina shared that this was their childhood dream. Becoming a parent was seen as a life purpose by the participants and this elicits how

meaningful such a transition was for them. One must also think about the various factors that could have informed their perspectives, such as their families, social context, and even their own individual beliefs about what they wanted to achieve in life (Gouveia et al., 2021).

5.2.2 Difficult stories and emotions

When thinking about how meaningful this transition was for them, it was saddening to hear how all three couples faced hurdles in their process of becoming biological parents. They attended multiple medical appointments, and it seemed as if their life plan suddenly vanished, which was devastating. Research shows that infertility-related stress negatively impacts the quality of life for couples (Ngai & Loke, 2022) and this was also true for these three couples. Apart from having to cope with their emotional distress, they also had to respond to life's daily commitments, which was not easy.

Ngai and Loke (2022) explained that having a strong family sense of coherence (FSOC) helped couples cope with life's difficulties, such as that of infertility. In this study, family life was very meaningful and, having a high FSOC may have been a factor that helped them cope. Indeed, they found support from each other, and still considered themselves a family unit even if without having children yet.

5.2.3 Considering alternative options

Research suggests that there is an increased likelihood to consider fostering for couples who experience infertility and may have not managed to adopt a child (Gouveia et al., 2021). All couples faced difficulties in having their own children, and fostering might have not even been considered if they had not been through their unfortunate stories.

Accepting that they cannot become biological parents was a long and difficult process which led to a difficult conversation around what should come next.

The trajectory of their decisions to enter a parenting role through fostering, were distinct from one another. For Natasha and Charles, fostering was their first choice as they had prior knowledge and always considered it. Romina and Nicholas originally sought to adopt a child, however, after hearing more about what fostering entailed, they decided to become foster carers. Finally, Joan and Stephen expressed that they also sought the path of adoption, however, they experienced multiple hurdles in this process. After visiting and becoming acquainted with a child in a residential home, the couple were introduced to fostering when exploring increased contact with this child.

These unique narratives exemplified the distinctiveness of each couple's experiences in their transition to parenting. Douglas (2018) pointed out the importance for couples to be aware of their own life scripts and how these could influence them in their journey. This awareness is essential since couples who foster have self-oriented motivations as well as child centred ones, and being led by self-oriented motivations is not ideal (Gouveia et al. 2021). In fact, the couples of this study believed that it was not appropriate to foster a child solely to meet a personal need to be a parent. Parenting through fostering required more 'giving' than 'receiving' and it was a concept that took time for some participants to understand.

5.2.4 Their expectations

McGoldrick et al. (2016) explain that couples who are preparing to transition to parenthood reflect on their childhood resources, openly communicate expectations, roles, and desired parenting philosophies, and acknowledge the transition from a couple to a family unit

to adjust new priorities. These discussions were held between the participating couples, and they were all motivated to become parental figures. Even after the hurdles in seeking to become biological parents or adoptive parents, after working on their own situation, they were fully invested to consider the path of fostering.

In Sanders et al.'s (2023) study, some expecting parents created unrealistic expectations and this negatively impacted their parental experience. This contrasts to the stories of the participants in this study. Their expectations towards a drastic change in their lifestyle and routine were met and it took time to adjust themselves to a new life. The shift was described as natural, but what then seemed to have exceeded their expectations was in managing the added weight brought about by the context of fostering. This was an interesting insight that shed light on the particularity of their transition to parenthood.

5.3 Stepping into the world of parenting through fostering

5.3.1 A change that brought out many emotions

Parenting through fostering was described in a way which saw the participants experience a vast range of emotions. They felt heightened feelings of satisfaction and fulfilment, reinforced not only by reaching their aspirations, but also by the children's reactions to their care, making it a heart-warming experience. I was struck by how some participants felt that their gesture to try and heal these traumatised children was, in itself, a healing experience for their own traumatic stories.

Alternatively, although the transition was described as natural, it still brought about difficult emotions in view of a completely new lifestyle and adjusting to a much busier routine. Besides the significant milestone of transitioning into parenthood (Cowan & Cowan,

2018), the necessity to also fulfil a professional role by being foster carers, accompanied the change. This required them to meet numerous commitments, whereby voicing out the needs of the child with relevant professionals was seen as a priority. The complexities involved to fulfil this part of their role was experienced as most difficult in their transition to parenthood.

Sprecher et al. (2021) suggest that typifying foster carers to be either ‘professional’ or ‘parental’ is an oversimplification since it involves a difficult fusion of both. The participants often shared a sensation of feeling conflicted between wanting to give their utmost to parenting these vulnerable children, needing to speak cautiously since they were not the biological parents, whilst being part of a whole system in place. In fact, Schofield et al. (2013) suggested that foster carers tended to experience role conflict and often faced difficult emotional entanglement. They suggested the value of being able to flexibly identify between being foster carers as well as a parents.

5.3.2 New levels of flexibility & adjustment

In bearing a multitude of responsibilities, the couples found themselves in a position which necessitated lots of flexibility to address evolving situations. This corroborates the study of Lietz et al. (2016) who explained that adjustment required flexibility, creativity, and that both individuals in the couple relationship need to give their contribution. Participating couples of this study, emphasized the importance of supporting one another.

A key aspect of this journey into parenthood involved the way these parents had to learn to adjust their expectations about these children. They assumed that their personal, academic and social achievements were not going to be as high as those children who had everything right from birth. This factor was also found in literature, whereby Van Holen et al. (2019) mention how the creation of realistic expectations facilitated a better transition.

5.3.3 The added weight that comes with fostering

A significant emergence from this study was that the effort to transition into first-time parents seemed overshadowed by the extra effort required to address the additional weight brought about by fostering. In order to make more meaning of this, I shall discuss some key experiences that brought out the essence of this finding, including uncertainty, caring for a traumatised child, as well as dealing with the biological family and the system.

5.3.3.1 Certain Uncertainty

Participants all agreed on how the fostering experience brought with it the certainty of lots of uncertainty in the process. The couples felt frequently on edge in knowing that the child's care plan could change, unaware about whether these children would keep on residing with them or not. This also corroborates with literature, whereby uncertainty is experienced in knowing that the scope of fostering is for possible reintegration or when a child's plan remains unclear (Blythe et al., 2013, Sitjes-Figueras et al., 2022). Participants were left in an ambiguous position.

Even though the participants became emotionally involved with providing love and care, they were faced with the barrier of uncertainty in not knowing if and when this child would leave their home. This factor made them worry about the child's future, which made them seek assurance that their efforts towards the child were not in vain.

Michell (2016) found that such uncertainty can create barriers in the relationship between foster children and their respective caregivers. Despite facing this uncertainty, the couples in this study indicated that, they wanted to be there for these children no matter what would happen, especially considering their trauma.

5.3.3.2 Caring for a child with trauma

Children who have been traumatized tend to externalise difficult behaviour, leading to high parenting stress (Bergsund et al., 2019). In fact, participating couples felt that their adaptation into parenthood was quite particular, as it required them to be very cautious and tentative in order to see what would be most helpful.

The results reflected how regular parenting was not always effective since parents had to constantly factor in that they were caring for children with trauma. Van Holen et al. (2019) stated that trauma-sensitive care is a key role since it requires foster carers to be curious and to understand how trauma could be influencing the child. In addition, being mindful about this can support foster carers to cope and respond better to challenging behaviours.

Moreover, trauma exposure from the child's biological family often results in PTSD symptoms which can create numerous difficulties in the child's overall development (Teculeasa et al., 2023). Participating couples shared different concerns regarding symptoms reflecting how therapeutic parenting was required, since this attempted to prioritize the traumatic experiences of children and help them recover (Douglas, 2018).

5.3.3.3 The biological family

Foster families provide the essential care for children when their biological family were unable to provide it (Lietz et al., 2016). Even though they meet all of their basic and emotional needs, they are still not their biological parents (Mitchell, 2016). This means that couples who become first time parents through fostering are essentially parenting someone else's child. In this study, such phenomena was certainly a factor that contributed towards the additional weight experienced by the couples as they transitioned to parenthood.

There was a sense of anxiety and fear as to how different situations could be interpreted by the biological family. This was also evident in Nesmith et al.'s (2017) study, whereby foster carers felt caught up in between the interpretations of the biological family and the fostering agency. Mancinelli et al. (2021) add that it is a stressor for such couples trying to build and maintain a relationship with the biological family, and the couples in this study confirmed that this was also an additional role to parenting these children. Even if a positive relationship between the biological parents and foster carers was not possible, in reflecting about what was helpful for the children, the couples explained that promoting a good relationship between the children and their biological family was helpful. This confirms Frederico et al.'s (2017) findings, whereby a positive relationship between the child and biological parents can therapeutically improve the child's outcomes.

Other factors related to the biological family which influenced the parental experience of these couples was in how sometimes the children's access with their parents seemed to negatively influence the child's behaviour and attitude. This was concerning to them since, as part of their role, they were also tasked to see what was going to help the child develop in the best way possible after experiencing trauma. Moreover, taking over someone else's parenting was a difficult task, especially for older children since this often made it hard for the couples to decipher the child's thoughts and feelings.

5.3.3.4 The system

Unlike new biological parents, couples who become parents through fostering have plenty of roles, and one of them is to collaborate with the system (Pinto and Luke, 2022). While the participants acknowledged the need for a system, similar to Mancinelli et al.'s (2021) findings, foster carers reported additional complexities in the child welfare system and

this was seen as an extra burden towards fulfilling a parenting role which was already difficult in itself.

Despite their full commitment, all couples felt limited in decision making. This was also true in Cooley et al.'s (2017) research where foster carers wanted to be involved in the system's decisions towards the child's plan, to feel part of a team, and to be respected as an important person in the child's life. In addition, the couples of this study felt that their actions were often over-analysed and misunderstood. The latter was especially frustrating since, whilst being immersed into the child's needs, they felt that their voices were unheard, and their motivations often misinterpreted for the wrong intentions. This led to unpleasant and contradictory feelings since, whilst being trusted to fulfil a parental role with these children, they felt that they were not treated as such.

5.4 Conclusion

Becoming a first-time parent through fostering is a unique path influenced by multiple factors, especially with the added weight brought about by the context of fostering itself. This chapter discussed the findings of this study in light of existant relevant literature. The next chapter concludes the study, referring to limitations and highlighting recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study has shown that transitioning to parenting through fostering is a unique experience. This chapter presents the salient findings and their implications for practice. Limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research are suggested.

6.2 Salient Findings

The scope for this study was to answer the question: ‘What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?’

The findings substantiate arguments already mentioned in existing literature about fostering. However, the strength of this research is in how it zooms into the transition to parenthood for those couples whose first experience to care for a child has specifically been through fostering. To my knowledge, there has been no previous literature that focuses exclusively on this and, hence, through the emerging themes, this study helps to address such gap by presenting some of the most prominent experiences of this transition.

Primarily, the concept of caring for a child was seen as a life purpose. Despite facing difficulties to become biological parents, the couples narrated their emotional journey in having to plan what was going to come next. When discussing fostering, the couples emphasised the importance that such a decision required the agreement and full commitment of both parties.

Becoming parental figures through fostering seemed as if they were opening ‘Pandora’s Box’ since the journey before fostering a child, and the arising situations encountered after, were highly unpredictable, requiring lots of flexibility.

The transition into parenthood itself was described positively, whereby the role provided lots of satisfaction, nevertheless several complexities were mentioned as part of parenting a foster child.

For these couples, the transition to parenthood involved plenty of ups and downs, impacting their individual selves as well as their couple relationships. Caring for the child of another was not an easy task, whilst parenting a foster child also implied different interactions with the system. In light of this, the couples expressed that, while needing to rely on their own couple relationship, having a strong support system from one's family, friends and even from the agency was crucial.

6.4 Implications for practice

The findings of this study create a foundation that facilitates empathy and understanding towards the complexity involved. The relationships between foster children and couples who foster is reciprocal (Chodura et al., 2020) and this awareness can motivate professionals be more curious and attentive in the way they formulate interventions (Baptiste et al., 2017). Since both the agency and the foster carers form part of the child's support system, importance should be given in sustaining the agency-foster carer relationship as it is one of the most important factors towards successful foster care (Gouveia et al., 2021).

Moreover, insight from this study can be particularly useful to the field of family therapy. This modality of psychotherapy seeks to work with different sub-systems (Minuchin, 1974). Knowing more about the complexity and involvement of so many sub-systems around a foster child, can enhance the process of hypothesizing (Selvini et al., 1980) and formulating helpful interventions for couples during such a challenging transition (Cowan et al., 2014).

6.5 Limitations and Recommendations for future research

While my role as a social worker within the Fostering Service may have been resourceful to better understand certain aspects exclusive to fostering, it may have also been a limitation in the way I might have interpreted information. Moreover, my own phase in the lifecycle (McGoldrick et al., 2016) is one where I have yet to experience my own family of procreation and, in having limited personal experience, this may have restricted my ability to resonate and fully understand the depth involved in such experiences. In light of this, I dedicated more time to immerse myself in the audio recordings and transcripts, while I also discussed emerging findings with my supervisor to ensure that the presented findings elicit data that captures the participants' views rather than my interpretations (Tuffour, 2017).

In addition, due to wordcount limitations, I had to be selective when formulating emerging findings, leading me to exclude information which also made part of the participants' experiences. Moreover, time constraints limited the number of participants for this study, hence, future research can focus on creating a study which has a larger and more diverse sample size.

Since this study explored the exclusive experience of those couples who became first time parents through fostering, perhaps, a comparative study between biological parents and foster couples can shed light on the differences that lie between their transitions into parenthood. Furthermore, another interesting study may be to explore the experience of those couples who already had their own children and fostered a child for their first time.

6.6 Conclusion

As a soon-to-be husband, a trainee family therapist, and as a social worker within the field of fostering, I felt motivated to gain in-depth insight of the unique experiences of

couples who learned to parent by fostering a child. This study presented a rich amount of information generously provided by three couples, of which implications for practice and recommendations for future research were mentioned.

This research has led me to reflect upon how precious the cycle of life is, whereby it has been beautiful to witness the devotion of these adults who wish to give their love towards children who need it, even if these children are not their own! In fact, Joan shared: *‘It’s a nice experience because, in your eyes, you’re not going to see the child as fostered. What I was going to do with my own, I am doing it with him. I invested myself completely in him’* (p.3).

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Appendix A – Information Letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Mr. Kurt Chetcuti and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Family Therapy and Systemic Practice. I am conducting a research study for my thesis titled 'What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?', which is being supervised by Dr. Ingrid Grech Lanfranco. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore the unique lived experience of couples who learn to fulfil parenting roles for the first time through the process of fostering. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of this unique experience, and also shed light on how this transition has affected you both individually as well as a couple. Data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to be interviewed at a time and place which is convenient to you. The interview can take place either in person or online and it shall be split into three parts. The first part shall include an interview with the two of you together as a couple. This will be followed by an individual interview with each of you to further understand your unique individual experience of the fostering journey. Interviews are expected to last around one to one and a half hours in duration.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation may lead to an emotional response and, should you require further support after this interview, with your permission, I can communicate with your respective social worker to ensure that you receive the necessary support.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. Data collected will be stored on a password protected laptop and encrypted. Names shall be pseudonymised and only myself as the researcher, my supervisor, Dr. Grech Lanfranco, and in exceptional circumstances my examiners, shall have access to this data.

In order to participate in this research, participants must be:

- **Heterosexual couples that live together and do not have any biological children of their own.**
- **Experienced parental roles for the first time through the process of fostering a child.**
- **Must have been fostering for at least one year.**

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data will be erased by December 2024.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail kurt.chetcuti.14@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor via email ingrid.grech-lanfranco@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,

Mr. Kurt Chetcuti

kurt.chetcuti.14@um.edu.mt

Dr. Ingrid Grech Lanfranco PhD

ingrid.grech-lanfranco@um.edu.mt

23403961

Ittra ta' Tagħrif

Għażiż/a Sinjur/a,

Jiena Kurt Chetcuti, student fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi Master fit-Terapija tal-Familja u l-Prattika Sistemika. Ir-riċerka għat-teżi tiegħi jisimha: 'What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?'; it-tutor tiegħi hi Dr Ingrid Grech Lanfranco. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka. Hawn taħt issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involvement tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tiegħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li nesplora l-esperjenza unika ta' koppji li jwettqu rwoli ta' trobbija għall-ewwel darba permezz tal-proċess tal-fostering. Sehem jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar din l-esperjenza unika, u tesplora kif din it-tranżizzjoni affettwatek, kemm personalment kif ukoll bħala koppja. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk taqbel li tipparteċipa, tintalab tiġi intervistat f'hin u f'post li huwa konvenjenti għalik. L-intervista tista' ssir wiċċ imb wiċċ jew onlajn u l-proċess tal-intervista hu maqsum fi tliet partijiet. L-ewwel parti tinkludi intervista mat-tnejn li intkom bħala koppja. Dan ser jiġi segwit b'intervista individwali ma' kull wiehied minnkom sabiex tinkiseb l-esperjenza unika tal-individwu fuq il-vjaġġ tal-fostering. L-intervisti huma mistennija jdumu bejn siegħa u siegħa u nofs.

Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju tkun għalkollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu/a li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll liberu/a li twaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laqget ittiegħdet fl-intervista miegħek tithassar dment li dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tintuża u tinzamm anonima.

Jekk tagħzel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għalik. Il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħek tista' twassal għal rispons emozzjonali u, jekk ikollok bżonn support wara l-intervista, bil-permess tiegħek, nista' nikkomunika mas-social worker rispettiv tiegħek biex niżgura li qed tircievi l-appoġġ meħtieġ.

Parteċipanti f'din ir-riċerka jridu jkunu:

- **Koppji eterosesswali li jgħixu flimkien u m'għandhomx tfal bijoloġiċi tagħhom stess.**
- **Esperjenzaw rwoli ta' ġenitur għall-ewwel darba permezz tal-proċess ta' fostering.**
- **Iridu jkunu ilhom jiffosterjaw minn tal-inqas sena.**

L-awdjio tal-intervisti ser jiġi rrekordjat u traskritt. Bħala parteċipant/a, għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak tithassar. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fl-istudju ser tinzamm fuq laptop li hu protett b'password u ser

tiġi kriptata. Ser jintużaw psewdonimi, u jien biss bħala r-riċerkatur, is-superviżur tiegħi, Dr. Grech Lanfranco, u f'ċirkustanzi rari l-eżaminaturi tiegħi, ser ikollna aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżzommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq kurt.chetcuti.14@um.edu.mt; tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lit-tutor tiegħi fuq ingrid.grechlanfranco@um.edu.mt.

Tislijiet,

Mr. Kurt Chetcuti
kurt.chetcuti.14@um.edu.mt

Dr. Ingrid Grech Lanfranco
ingrid.grechlanfranco@um.edu.mt
23403961

Appendix B – Participant’s Consent Form

What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Mr. Kurt Chetcuti. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a couple as well as individual interview in which the researcher will ask questions to explore the unique lived experience of couples who learn to fulfil parenting roles for the first time by fostering a child. I am aware that the interviews will take approximately one hour and a half. I understand that these will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation may instigate various emotions.
5. If I feel that the interview has distressed me in any way, I may make use of the support services information that Mr. Kurt Chetcuti will give me at the beginning of the interview. I am aware that this document comprises a list of free services. The document also includes fee-paying services which I understand I will have to pay for should I decide not to use free services. I also understand that, if given my permission, Mr. Kurt Chetcuti can get in touch with my social worker as part of the support provided to me.
 - ☐ I agree for the researcher to communicate with my social worker following my permission.
 - ☐ I do not agree for the researcher to communicate with my social worker.
6. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by raising more awareness for prospective foster carers and also for professionals to better understand their position to support foster carers.
7. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
8. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study and following publication of results.
9. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

10. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- ☐ I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
☐ I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

11. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
12. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer. Only the researcher, his supervisor, Dr. Ingrid Grech Lanfranco, and in exceptional circumstances my examiners, will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study until December 2024.
13. I am aware that if the interview will be held online; the researcher will use Zoom and will activate the *Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323* function. The researcher will only audio record the session.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

 Mr Kurt Chetcuti

kurt.chetcuti.14@um.edu.mt

 Dr. Ingrid Grech Lanfranco

Head of Department

Department of Child and Family Studies

Faculty for Social Wellbeing

ingrid.grech-lanfranco@um.edu.mt

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Formola tal-Kunsens tal-Parteċipant/a

What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?

Jiena, hawn taht iffirmat/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li nieħu sehem fl-istudju tas- Sur Kurt Chetcuti. Din il-formola tal-kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Inghatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u kull mistoqsija ngħatajt twegiba għaliha b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena liberu/a li naċċetta li nieħu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi penalizzat/a. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeċiedi li ma nwegibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħzel li ma nkomplix nieħu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ingabret mingħandi tithassar dment li jkun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħi tintuża u tinzamm anonima.
3. Nifhem li ġejt mistieden/mistiedna nipparteċipa f'intervista individwali u dik bħala koppja. Il-persuna li qed tagħmel ir-riċerka se tistaqsi mistoqsijiet biex tesplora l-esperjenza unika ta' koppji li jwettqu rwoli ta' trobbija għall-ewwel darba permezz tal-proċess tal-fostering. Jiena konxju/a li se ddum bejn wieħed u ieħor siegħa u nofs. Nifhem li l-intervisti se jsiru f'post u f'hin li huma komdi għaliha.
4. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi *tinkludi dawn ir-riskji*: tista' tqanqal emozzjonijiet varji.
5. Jekk inħoss li l-intervista b'xi mod iddisturbani, nista' nirreferi għat-tagħrif dwar is-servizzi ta' appoġġ li s-Sur Kurt Chetcuti se j/tgħaddili fil-bidu tal-intervista. Naf li d-dokument bit-tagħrif jinkludi lista ta' servizzi bla ħlas. Id-dokument fih ukoll xi servizzi bil-ħlas, li jkolli nagħmlu minn buti f'każ li ma nagħzilx is-servizzi bla ħlas. Nifhem ukoll li, jekk nagħti l-permess tiegħi, is-Sur Kurt Chetcuti jista' jikkuntattja lill-ħaddiem soċjali tiegħi sabiex nircievi s-sappoort meħtieġ.
 - ☐ Jiena naqbel li r-riċerkatur jikkomunika mal-ħaddiem soċjali wara li nkun tajt il-permess tiegħi.
 - ☐ Jiena ma naqbilx li r-riċerkatur jikkomunika mal-ħaddiem soċjali tiegħi.
6. Nifhem li *bil-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi f'dan l-istudju, m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċju dirett għaliha*. Nifhem ukoll li din ir-riċerka jaf tkun ta' benefiċċju għall-oħrajn għax: tista' tgħin billi tqajjem għarfien għal foster carers prospettivi u anke għal professjonisti biex jifhmu aħjar lill-foster carers u jissupportjawhom kif meħtieġ.
7. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġislazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani tithassar.
8. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura se *tithassar f'Diċembru 2024*.
9. Inghatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens.
10. Konxju/a li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa t'hawn taht, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo u maqlub/a f'kitba fl-istess waqt (traskrizzjoni).

IMMARKA BISS DAK LI JAPPLIKA

 - ☐ Naqbel li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
 - ☐ Ma naqbilx li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
11. Konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem ivvintat jew kodiċi - eż. parteċipant A].

12. Jiena konxju/a li l-informazzjoni tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi mhix se titnizzel fit-traskrizzjonijiet jew fin-noti tal-intervista, imma minflok, se niġi assenjat/a kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jorbtu l-informazzjoni dwari mal-identità tiegħi se jinżammu b'mod sigur u separat mill-informazzjoni, f'file kodifikat fuq il-kompjuter tar-riċerkatur/riċerkatriċi, protetti b'password. Ir-riċerkatur, Dr Ingrid Grech Lanfranco, u f'każijiet rari l-eżaminaturi biss se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jitqiegħed f'armarju msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju se jinżamm b'mod sigur *sakemm isir l-istudju* sa Diċembru 2024.
13. Jiena naf li jekk l-intervisti se jsiru online; u r-riċerkatur se juża Zoom u se jattiva l-għażla tar-*Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323*. Ir-riċerkatur se jirrekordja *d-diskors* biss ta' *waqt is-sessjoni, mingħajr filmat*.

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet t'hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-parteeipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

Mr Kurt Chetcuti

kurt.chetcuti.14@um.edu.mt

Dr. Ingrid Grech Lanfranco

Head of Department

Department of Child and Family Studies

Faculty for Social Wellbeing

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Appendix C – Interview Schedules

What is the lived experience of couples who transition into parenthood for the first time by fostering a child?

Part 1 – Interview with the couple together

Joining the couple

- How long have you been together?
- How did you meet?

Decision to enter parenting role

- Have you always wanted to be in a parenting role? What is your understanding of this?
- How did you come to decide to approach fostering?
- Were you both in agreement?
- What were your ideas and expectations about the fostering experience?
- Is this similar to what you've experienced?
 - o If not, in what way?
- How do you see each other as foster carers/parents?
- How would you describe this transition to becoming parental figures? Is it what you imagined/expected? How so?
- How would you describe the child? Meeting the child for the first time? What was this like?
- How did you negotiate roles between yourselves as a couple?
- When transitioning into a parental role, how would you describe the communication held between yourselves?

Relationship

- How do you perceive your relationship?
- How important is your relationship for you?
- How would you compare your relationship between when you were a couple alone to when you entered the parenting role through fostering?
- What were your expectations about how your relationship will adapt towards this transition to a parental role?
- What are the changes that you like & dislike?
- What do you need from each other to support your roles as foster carers?
- What do you need from each other to sustain the couple relationship?

Support system

- Who formed part of your support system throughout this journey so far?

- What support do you need?
- What support system would you recommend to new foster carers who are also going through the transition to parenthood for the first time?

Part 2 & 3 – Individual Interview

Personal experience in becoming a parental figure

- How would you narrate the time when you first considered the path of fostering into parenting?
- How would you describe the discussion between you and your partner when deciding to apply for fostering which lead you to become parental figures?
- How would you describe your own experience of transitioning into the parenting role through fostering?
- What does this experience give you?
- What has parenting through fostering meant for you?
- What does it mean for your relationship as a couple?
- (Present scenario) At first you had no initial connection with the child however had to become parents. This also took place for the first time and you were also in a position to do better!
 - How was that experience like for you?
 - Tell me more about it.
- How is it for you to parent a child who already has a biological family?
- Do you think that parenting a child of your own would have been different?

The couple relationship

- How do you think your partner experienced this transition?
- How has parenting changed your partner as an individual?
- How has parenting influenced your partner's role in the couple relationship?
- What kind of communication was needed after the transition towards a parenting role?
- How did you manage conflicts with your partner since becoming parents through fostering?
 - What would these conflicts usually be about?

Support needed in transitioning to parenthood

- What kind of support did you need throughout this transition to parenthood?
- From whom did you need it? Are you satisfied with the support that you found?
- Would you recommend it to someone else?
- What advice would you give someone who wants to seek this transition?
 - How come?
 - What changed your mind? / What helped you reinforce this idea?

Appendix D – Sample of analysed transcript

Sample selected from page 11 from the first interview with Natasha and Charles.

Emerging Themes	Interview	Notes
Keeping an open mindset and avoid creating conditions.	I: So, dhalt fl-irwol with an open mind qisu, għal dak li ġej. P2: Ija, ma tantx tista', ma tistax tgħid min ġej, lanqas tista' tagħmel kundizzjonijiet.	
Transitioning into parenthood with a child who has already grown a little.	P1: Aħna konna għidnielhom li l-unika kundizzjoni li jkunu, dak iż-żmien iċ-childcare ma kienx għadu popolari, konna għidna minn tliet snin 'il fuq biex tmur jew imur Kinder, fhimt?	The couple had to keep in mind the practical aspect as well, which makes this unique in itself.
A difficult balance of wanting to plan ahead but having to remain flexible. It is hard to create and stick to rigid plans in fostering.	P2: Ghax konna nahdmu wkoll u kellna l-loans, jiġifieri ma tistax tieqaf fis-sens. P1: U qisek fostering diffiċli tagħmel pjan minn qabel li tieqaf, naraha jien, imma immagina tieqaf sena inti, tagħmel pjan, tirraġa biex tieqaf sena u mbagħad, jien naf, idum ftit u jitlaq. I: Użgur, so għalhekk qisu - -	Having to plan...but finding it difficult to plan ahead at the same time. Difficult reality of fostering.
An exclusive experience of transitioning into parenthood but not through a newborn.	P1: Aħna l-pjan qatt ma kien li nieqaf nahdem, qed tifhem? Jiġifieri anke dik, pereżempju, li ma jkunx baby nahseb u mbagħad, ha ngħidlek, din importanti naraha jien fil-każ tagħna kienet. Xhin iddeċidejna li mmorru għall-fostering kien għadda biżżejjed żmien biex, għalkemm konna nafu li ha jkollna l-irwol ta' ġenitur ma' dawn it-tfal, min jiġi, imma kien għadda biżżejjed żmien biex qisu konna konxji hafna li dawn mhux it-tfal tagħna fil-verità, taf kif? Anke l-fatt li ma ridniex baby, qisna mbagħad aħna morna l-fostering, orrajt, speċi jien xtaqt li jkolli, it-tfal inħobbhom.	This transition requires lots of planning and flexibility.
Fulfilling the parent role, but not being the biological parent.		This was an interesting reflection, as she entered with a mindset of knowing that she was going to fill in for the parenting of another.
Caring for the child of another		

Appendix E – Quote translations Maltese to English

Charles p.3: Qisu istint uman.

'Is like a human instinct'

Stephen p.2: Tiġi naturali qisha.

'Seems to come naturally'

Natasha p.1: Dix-xewqa li nkun ġenitur dejjem dejjem kienet hemm, jiġifieri din kienet qisu kważi waħda mill-main life purposes.

'Wish to be a parent was always there, meaning that it's always one of life's main purposes'

Romina p.8: Kienet il-ħolma tagħna.

'This was our dream'

Nicholas p.1: L-iskop kien għall-familja, dejjem ridna familja.

'The scope was towards creating a family as we always wanted one'

Stephen p.1: Għall-ewwel morna għand tobba u tawna mediċini; lanqas naf x'ma ppruvajniex. Għamilna xhur li spiċċaw snin.

'We went to doctors who gave us medicine and we have explored different options. We spent months, which then turned to years'

Stephen p.1: Moħħi ma kienx qed sew mija fil-mija. Ippruvajt nibqa' għaddej bil-ħajja normali. Imma iebsa li jkollok pjan u qisu kollox jisfaxxa fix-xejn. F'ħakka t'għajn qisu jinbidel l-għan.

'My mind wasn't there. I tried to keep on going with life. However, it's tough to have a plan and then everything vanishes into nothing. The sense of purpose changed in the blink of an eye'

Natasha p.30: Din li ma kellniex tfal tagħna kienet tragedja għaliġa

'Not having biological children was a tragedy to me'

Romina p.2: Ma kien faċli xejn. Kien diffiċli ħafna u li kieku ma konniex b'saħħitna, tkissirna.

'It wasn't easy at all. It was very difficult and if we were not strong we would have collapsed'

Natasha p.5: U f'dis-sitwazzjoni, imbagħad, domna biex iddeċidejna x'se nagħmlu u li qisu għalaqnieha li mhux ħa jkollna tagħna, għaddew għaxar snin miż-żwieġ.

'In this situation, it took a long time for us to decide what we were going to do and to come to terms that we were not going to have our own. Ten years passed since our marriage'

Stephen p.2: Kienet terapija tajba għall-mara wkoll l-iżjed; mhux għax għaliya le, ta! Kienet tkun kuntenta u l-burdati kienu jinbidlu ħafna.

'It was good therapy for my wife, and also for myself! She seemed happy and her moods changed as well'

Natasha p.30: Meta nħares lura, kien hemm ħafna healing: li tara t-tfal qishom they heal from certain... and in the process of their healing from their trauma, jien, kif inħares lura, nara li it ended up as well healing my own traumatic experience.

'When looking back, there was a lot of healing. Seeing the children healing from their trauma ended up healing my own traumatic experience!'

Romina p.2: Meta konna fil-problema kien jgħidli, 'Ejja naddottaw.' Jien kont għadni naqra lura fiha.

'When we were in the problem, he used to tell me that we should approach adoption. However, I was still laid back'

Stephen p.2: Ikkwalifikajna biex nistgħu naddottaw. Qalulna x'tirrikjedi u l-flus involuti. Imma kien diffiċli. Konna għadna qed inħallsu d-dar...heqq, finanzjarjament ma kinitx ideali.

'We were qualified to adopt a child. Then when we were informed about what the process would entail, and the money needed. But this was going to be difficult. We were still paying the home loan...financially it was not ideal'

Natasha p.5: Charles kien ċar li ma xtaqx adoption, li minn barra minn Malta u hekk p.5

'Charles was clear in thinking that he did not wish to adopt, especially since it would involve adopting from a foreign country'

Nicholas p.8: Hawn hafna bzonn f'Malta.

'There is a great need for this in Malta'

Charles p.34: Min jidhol fil-fostering jahseb li ha jipprova jsolvi in-nuqqas tat-tfal jew ghax jixtieq ikun genitur, nahseb ha jaghmel zball.

'I think that one would be mistaken to enter fostering with the thought that it would solve the lack of children or the need to become a parent'

Natasha p.32: L-ewwel ikunu jridu hadmu fuq l-issue li huma m'ghandhomx (it-tfal) taghhom ghax inkella nahseb li titkisser, eh! Nahseb kieku la taghmel gid lilek u wisq inqas lit-tfal ghax huma... inti dejjem, kif qed nghidlek, trid iggib quddiem ghajnejk li hemm biċċa fil-fostering li hi incerta hafna speċjalment fil-bidu.

'First, they must have worked on the issue of not being able to have children of their own, otherwise it would be tough! I think that it wouldn't be beneficial to yourself and neither to the children. You must picture the idea that, in fostering, there is a lot of uncertainty, especially in the beginning'

Natasha p.33: Inti ma tistax tistenna minn dawn it-tfal bhallikieku kienu tieghek u wellidhom inti.

'You cannot expect these children to act as if they are yours'

Natasha p.31: Li kieku kellna taghna, niddubita li xi darba konna nċemplu u nghidu li ahna interessati.

'If we had our own children, I doubt that we would have called to share our interest'

Charles p.6: qisu dejjem konna nghidu li kieku jkollna ċ-ċans, nidhlu ghalih il-fostering. Qisu kien xi haġa li qieghda fuq l-ixkaffa tistenna.

'We always used to say that, if we had the chance, we would go for fostering. It was always an option'

Natasha p.1: Kif speċi kont nara li jista' jkun hemm opportunità ta' parenting through other routes, u li qisu ma kinitx taqtaghli qalbi din, li naghmel parenting through fostering.

'I saw the opportunity to parent through other routes and I did not give up on the idea of parenting through fostering'

Romina p.3: Imbagħad kont ċempilt hawnhekk jien biex nibdew il-kors ta' adoption u ċemplitli lura persuna li qaltli li tixtieq tkellimni dwar fostering iktar milli adoption. Iltqajt ma' dil-persuna, tkellimna bħala koppja u għedna, 'Why not?'.
'I called Appogg to proceed with the course in adoption. A person called back explaining that she wishes to speak to them about fostering. We met her, we spoke as a couple, and said 'Why not?'

Stephen p.3: Ma konniex nafu eżatt xi tfisser u x'tinvolvi u x'tinkludi. Imbagħad saqsejna u għamilna, u għibna iktar informazzjoni.
'We did not know exactly what it meant and what it involves. Then we asked and gathered more information'

Natasha p.3: Xi haġa li inti taqşam flimkien żgur, jiġifieri qisu xi haġa komuni li qed tinvesti fiha flimkien, li hi parti minnek it-tnejn hux.
'This is a decision that is surely shared together. It is a common investment which makes part of both individuals'

Romina p.12: L-imporatanti li jkun hemm diskussjoni bejn il-persuni u jekk ikun hemm xi doubt minn waħda mill-persuni, think it twice, għax imbagħad mal-ewwel problemi jibda jċedi. Il-fundament irid ikun sod.
'It's important that there is a discussion between the individuals. If someone has any doubt, it would be best to think it twice, otherwise there would be problems with the first emerging problem. The foundation needs to be strong'

Natasha p.12: Diffiċli tagħmel pjan minn qabel.
'It's difficult to plan ahead'

Romina p.1: Dawn ma tkun qatt rajthom, ma taf xejn dwarhom; kaxxa magħluqa u ma tafx ma xiex se tiltaqa', u ma xiex se tħabbat wiċċek u kif se tilqa' għal kwakunkwe need li jinqala'
'You never saw them before, you know nothing about them. It's a closed box. You don't know what you're going to face and how you're going to meet their arising needs'

Romina p.1: Imma bejn dak li tkun smajt u l-fatti, hemm oċean
'There is an ocean between the facts and what you would have heard'

Nicholas p.2: Ġurnata b' ġurnata trid tgħaddiha

'You need to live the experience day by day'

Romina p.1: Vera looking forward u eċitati...lanqas hemm kelma biex niddeskriviha

'We were looking forward and excited! There isn't even a word that can describe it'

Romina p.1: Aħna konna ġa qed nistennew li tiġi tarbija fi żmien xahrejn. Konna ppreparati; imma mbagħad waqajna naqra down u meta ċemplulna bil-każ qisna konna naqra, mhux 'overwhelmed', qisu konna 'ixxukkjati' li minn persuna waħda kienu se jiġu tnejn, u kien hemm il-push biex anki jiġi t-tielet wiehed.

'We were already waiting to welcome a newborn in the span of two months. We were prepared, but then felt disheartened [when there was a change of plans]. When we received a call about another case. We were, not overwhelmed, but shocked, that from one child it became two, and there even was a push for the third one'

Nicholas p.7: U jien għedtlek kemm-il darba biex lil tan-nofs ingibuh ukoll. Kien jaqbizli d-dmugh.

'I told her multiple times that we should also foster the middle child. My eyes shed tears.'

Joan p.12: Jekk ma tasalx ittihom lura, aħjar jekk il-pass ma tagħmlux.

'It would be best to avoid stepping into fostering if you feel that you won't be able to give them back'

Romina p.6: Biża' li t-tfal jistgħu jmorru lura kien, għad hemm u jibqa' jkun hemm. Inkun qed nigdeb jekk ngħidlek li m'hemmx.

'There has always been a fear that the children can go back and there still is. I would be lying if I tell you that there isn't'

Natasha p.14: U ġiet għal kważi ġimgħa biss. Konna nafu li għal ftit, imma mbagħad, gravi kont wara li telqet għax baby naħseb, fhimt? Dik hassejtha hafna, qalbi qsamtha, ma flahthiex titlaq, vera, għadni naħseb fiha.

'She was here for only a week. We knew that it was going to be for a short duration, however, I was in a bad state after she left. Perhaps, it was because she was a baby. I felt it a lot, I was heartbroken, I could not stand seeing her leave. I still think about her!'

Joan p.6: Iktar nervi. U kollox nibla' fl-istonku, dejjem imtertqa. Qisek ma tafx fejn int miegħu; illum miegħek, għada mhux; kif ħaduh, bdew jikkontestaw il-care order, imbagħad ma tafx hux se jibda l-fostering.

'I became more nervous. I had to suppress everything, feeling anxious. It's as if you don't know where you stand with the child; today he is here and tomorrow he may not be'

Charles p.10: Speċjalment qabel ma kellna il-permanenza. Kull sitt xhur ma tafx x'ha jiddeċiedi il-bord.

'Especially before permanency is granted. Every six months we did not know what the board may decide'

Romina p.1: Naħseb li r-relazzjoni hija l-iktar haġa importanti. Jekk ma jkunx hemm relazzjoni soda bejn il-koppja, bil-problemi li jġibu magħhom dawn it-tfal, it's very easy to split.

'I think that the couple relationship is the most important aspect. If there isn't a strong couple relationship, with the problems that these children bring with them, it is very easy to split'

Romina p.1: Żammejna kollox ma' ta' ġewwa nett, għax hbieb u kollegi tax-xogħol ma kienu għadhom jafu xejn.

'We kept all the information to the people closest to us. Our friends and work colleagues didn't know anything'

Charles p.1: Kellna ħafna kmamar għadhom mhux lesti jiġifieri addattajna il-kamra u għamilniha l-għamara

'We had rooms that were not yet ready and so, we made the necessary arrangements to furnish them'

Charles p.1: Ma kontx qed nistenna li nibqgħu ngħixu kif konna qed ngħixu qabel jiġifieri. Naħseb kienet naturali il-bidla jiġifieri

'I was not expecting to live in the same way we used to. However, I think this change was natural'

Natasha p.11: L-unika kundizzjoni li jkun, dak iż-żmien iċ-childcare ma kienx għadu popolari, konna għidna minn tliet snin 'il fuq biex tmur jew imur Kinder.

'The only condition was that, since childcare was not yet popular, we sought a child who is three years or older so that he or she can go to kinder'

Charles p.11: Ma kinitx daqshekk baby u ahna ma tlabnihomx tarbija, hafna affarijiet li konna nagħmlu qabel bhal per eżempju noħorġu, stajna nibqgħu nagħmlulhom jiġifieri ma kinitx daqshekk diffiċli biex naddattaw.

‘She was not a baby, and we hadn’t asked for one, most things that we used to do, such as going out, we could have still done them. Therefore, it wasn’t that difficult to adapt’

Romina p.7: Hu kien ferħan se jtir, bid-dmugh f’għajnejh. Kienet il-ħolma tagħna. Tkun ilek tistennieha. Jiena bdejt niffosterja kont ili ġa għaxar snin miżżewwġa, jiġifieri mhux wara ġimagħtejn.

‘He was so happy that he had tears in his eyes! It was our dream. We were yearning for this moment. I started fostering at an age where I was already married for ten years, and not just after two weeks’

Natasha p.37: Kwazi dik hija overwhelming daqsxejn, li inti qisek ftaħt il-bieb u kien hemm ilma ġej, diehel, u kif ftaħt il-bieb dahal kollu, ma għandekx kontroll kemm ha jidhol minnu.

‘This is a little overwhelming. It’s as if you opened a door and you saw water coming from the other side. As soon as I opened this door, I did not have control over how much water enters’

Charles p.37: Ir-rutini nbidlu, kulhadd għamel l-almu tiegħu biex l-affarijiet jimxu sewwa.

‘Routines changed, everyone played their part to ensure that things function well’

Stephen p.5: Allura, qisu l-kuntatt sar iktar malajr, ambjentajna iktar malajr għaliha l-affarijiet. Kien hemm qisu daqsxejn daww il-biċċiet lesti, ha ngħidu hekk.

‘Therefore, contact happened more quickly, those bits of the process were already complete’

Stephen p.14: Kienet ġurnata kollha xita u ridna nibqgħu nistennew sa xi t-tmienja ta’ filgħaxija.

‘It was raining all day and we kept on waiting till eight in the evening’

Joan p.5: Kompletament xejn ma kienet easy. Ittih il-bottle, jibda jwerżaq twerżiq, ma tkunx taf x’taqbad tagħmel. Kont lanqas naf nagħmillu l-ikel.

‘It was not easy! Even though you’d give him a bottle, he would scream so loud. I didn’t even know what I could do. I did not even know how to prepare his food yet!’

Romina p.5: Meta tidhol għaliha, jew you go for it inkella jekk ma nidholx għaliha jien bħala foster parent.

'When you enter the role, you either go for it, otherwise you should not take up the role as a foster parent'

Natasha p.21: Jiena dħalt għaliha totalment li lesta naċċetta u nibqa' l-parent tagħhom, jagħmlu x'jagħmlu.

'I entered with the mindset to accept and remain their parent no matter what they do'

Charles p.21: Kif tgħix fid-dar ha jinbidel hafna, imma mhux l-istil ta' koppja li konna qed ngħixu.

'The way we lived at home changed a lot, it did not remain in the way we lived as a couple'

Charles p.1: Minhabba logistika u minhabba li trid taddatta ruhek għal sitwazzjoni ġdida, bħal familja.

'Because of logistics and in the way you need to adapt to a new situation as a family'

Natasha p.22: Naħseb hu, f'din il-bieċa tal-emozzjonijiet, sab ruħu challenged iżjed. Hu, għalih ġa kienet challenge bħala koppja li juri l-emozzjonijiet tiegħu.

'I think that he was challenged in the emotional aspect. It was already a challenge for him when we were as a couple to show his emotions'

Natasha p.22: Imbagħad, xhin ġew it-tfal, barra li kellu lili, niffittah li dawn l-affarijiet importanti, it-tfal bla ma trid ha jmorru fuqu biex jgħannquh u jistennew li dan se jinħall ftit. Imbagħad, speċi dan poġġieh f'pożizzjoni li 'issa anki dawn iridu'... Imma naħseb mat-tfal kienet iktar faċli; jiġifieri rnexxielu jibni relazzjonijiet tajbin hafna mat-tfal.

'When children came, apart from having myself pestering him that these [emotional aspects] are important, the children innocently would go to him, hug him, and expect him to loosen up a little. This seemed to place him in a situation that 'now even they need....' But I think that with children it was easier, meaning that he managed to build really good relationship with the children'

Nicholas p.3: Iebsa hux sakemm tidraha, iebsa għax tkun drajt mod u mbagħad trid tibda kollox mill-ġdid għax imbagħad l-ewwel it-tfal imbagħad inti.

'It is difficult until you get used to it. It is difficult because you would have got used to living one way and would have to start from scratch, because first you think about the children then about yourself'

Romina p.15: Ovvjament, qabel konna aktar flexible, free u nagħmlu dak li rridu u mmorru fejn nixtiequ'

'Obviously, before we were more flexible. We were free to do and go where we pleased'

Stephen p.4: Domt sena biex bdejt noqgħod Qisu giet bomba fuqi. Ridt nipprova nsib bilanċ bejn iċ-ċirkostanzi l-godda u l-karattru tiegħi.

'It took a year until I started to settle. It was as if a bomb fell on me. I needed to find balance between the new circumstances and my character'

Natasha p.31: tgħaddi minn affarijiet li mhumiex eżatti ta' kieku kellek it-tfal tiegħek bħala parent?

'You go through experiences that are not exactly as if you had your own children as a parent'

Charles p.26: Ma tistax tqisu parenting normali.

'You cannot consider this as normal parenting'

Natasha p.33: Ma tistenniex minn dawn it-tfal daqslikieku kellhom kollox minn day one.

'You cannot expect from these children as if they had everything from day one!'

Natasha p.22: Dawn it-tfal xi kultant joħolqulek tikka iktar challenges mis-soltu, b'dak li għaddew minnu'

'These children create more challenges than usual due to what they experienced'

Romina p.3-4: Li sirt parent kienet il-mod kif għaqqadna l-katina għax aħna t-tnejn minn dejjem xtaqna li jkollna familja; iċ-change ma hassejthiex daqshekk għax konna preparati għaliha.

'Becoming a parent was the way how we completed the chain because we both wished to have a family. I did not feel the change as much because we were prepared for this'

Natasha p.5: It-tfal għabu hafna ferħ.

'The children brought lots of joy'

Joan p.2: Qishom jimlew id-dar.

'It's as if they fill in your home'

Nicholas p.4: Sabiha hux, li tmur id-dar u jigi jghannqek, jew jara u jghidlek 'Ma' jew 'Pa'.

'It's nice to return home and see them coming to give you a hug, or when they call you 'mum' or 'dad''

Stephen p.3: Kull darba kien jigi, jaqbadli idi.

'Every time he came with us, he grabbed my hand'

Charles p.17: Ikun hemm ftit honeymoon period sabih.

'There would be a nice honeymoon phase'

Romina p.9: Bdejna bil-mod nimxu man-needs tat-tfal huma u jikbru. Tigi xi haga awtomatika. Trid taddatta għaċ-ċirkostanzi.

'We took it slowly, depending on the needs of the children as they grew up. It's automatic and you have to adapt to different circumstances'

Natasha p.25: Ovvjament, ikun hemm differenzi, imma lilna għaqditna hafna u li ttik ċertu sahha kienet li ahna t-tnejn konna naqblu u t-tnejn konna konxji hafna li issa ahna għandna role primarju li dit-tifla li giet magħna.

'Obviously we are going to have our differences, however, it helped us get closer and gave us a strength in knowing our primary role for this girl that came with us'

Romina p.8: Il-journey kien tant twil li qisek imbagħad trabbi qoxra li tissoda...bhala relazzjoni u bhala karattru wkoll.

'The journey was so long that you end up strengthening the relationship as well as your character'

Nicholas p.6: Qisha din teamwork trid tkun bilfors.

'Definitely requires teamwork'

Charles p.8: Għadhom ibatu ftit l-effett ta' dak li għaddew minnu le jġigifieri minn dak il-lat ikollok qisu bil-fostering ikollok sodisfazzjon ikbar għax inti tgħid: ara fejn wasalna jġigifieri.

'They still suffer from the effects of what they went through. Therefore, from a fostering perspective, you have a greater satisfaction because you would be able to say: 'look where we have arrived''

Stephen p.4: Jiena ridt nimxi fuq il-passi ta' missieri u forsi anki tan-nanniet. Użajt ħafna mill-metodi li huma użaw miegħi.

'I wanted to follow the footsteps of my father and maybe even of my grandparents. I used several methods that they used with me'

Romina p.11: Illum il-valuri li kadt fit-trobbija nipprova ngħaddihom lit-tfal.

'I try to pass on the values I have learned from my own upbringing to these children'

Charles p.9: Ikun hemm affarijiet li ma taqbilx fuqhom anke kif qed inrabbu.

'There are things that we do not agree upon, even in our ways of parenting'

Joan p.10: Iċċedi biċċa, hux. Ma kinitx ħafifa ta. Għax jien rasi iebba u hu wkoll.

'Giving in sometimes. It was not easy, since we are both hardheaded!'

Natasha p.32: Ikun hemm affarijiet li m'intix qed tipparentja waħdek fil-fostering hux, ikun hemm affarijiet oħra qed jinfluwenzaw.

'There are things which make you realise that you are not parenting alone in fostering. There are other influential factors'

Nicholas p.19: Il-karattru tagħhom jinbidel kompletament, kompletament eh! Ma jkunux l-istess tfal.

'Their characters change completely! They would not be the same children'

Natasha p.10: dak hu different from being a natural parent, a biological parent. There you have much which is in your control.

'It is different from being a biological parent. There you have much which is in your control'

Natasha p.10: Kien hemm mumentu meta kważi bdejta naqta' qalbi ghax din tant tajtha prioritata. Għamilt das-sagrificċji kollha għaliha, jekk ikollha bżonn tmur għand psikjatra teħodha għand l-aħjar, u xorta qisu b'dal-kumplessitajiet kollha there will be situations where she won't get the best.

'There were moments when I started to give up because I gave this such a priority. I made all these sacrifices, if she needed I would take her to the best psychiatrist, and still, with all these complexities, there will be situations where she won't get the best'

Romina p.7: Irridu nifhmu li dawn għaddew minn trawmi.

'We have to understand that they experienced trauma'

Stephen p.5: Bdejta nara kif għandi ngħib ruħi ma' tfal bħal dawn li jkunu għaddew minn vjolenza. Trid toqgħod attent x'tgħid u tagħmel quddiemhom.

'I started to evaluate my own actions with these children since they've been through violence. You must be attentive about what you say and do in front of them'

Charles p.27: Naħseb li biex irkupraw emozzjonalment, it-tlieta kellhom bżonn ħafna bżonnijiet, jiġifieri mnalla kien hawn Natasha għax, pereżempju, il-ħin ta' qabel l-irqad kien ikun importanti ħafna u hemmhekk it-tfal jifihom ħafna u anke meta jkunu jhossuhom qishom mitlufin.

'I think that they had to recover emotionally, all three of them had lots of needs. Fortunately, they found Natasha who, for instance, the time spent before bedtime was very important because they would open up a lot, and even during moments they felt lost'

Natasha p.16: Ma' dawn it-tfal in-number one goal is that they be happy as children and that they will grow up bil-potenzjal go fihom li jistgħu jkunu happy adults. Dak ġa huwa achievement kbir wara li inti jkun kellek dak is-setback fl-early years.

'With these children, the number one goal is that they are happy as children and that they will grow up with the potential to be happy adults. That is a huge achievement for them after having had a setback in their early years'

Charles p.8: Tiehu snin u hemm affarijiet naħseb għadhom ibatu ftit l-effett ta' dak li għaddew minnu.

'Takes years, and there are things which I think they still suffer from because of what they went through'

Nicholas p.12: Ġieli noqogħdu bilqiegħda u ngħidulhom: ‘Ejja ha nitkellmu naqa’, għax ma jistax ikun ilbieraħ kuntent u llum qiegħed hekk.

‘Let us speak for a little while because it’s not possible that yesterday you were happy and today you are like this’

Natasha p.22: U wkoll vera rari li jitlef il-kontroll, allura dik naħseb għat-tfal hija pożittiva hafna, jiġifieri dik xi haġa li jien nammira fih bħala parent.

‘He rarely ever loses control, and I think that this is something very positive for the children. This is something I admire in him as a parent’

Natasha p.22: Fid-diskors ta’ bejnietna dejjem kien ċar li kien hemm these two other families involved. Jiġifieri t-tlett itfal dejjem kibru b’dan in-knowledge.

‘Our conversations have always been clear that there are two families involved. The three children have always grown up with this knowledge’

Romina p.10: Nista’ nuża l-kelma? Xokk! Infatti lanqas ritratti m’għandi...kollox iddilijjtajt. Tant kien hemm needs fiżiċi li - mhux għax ma nixtieqx niftakarhom, ta, għax at the back of my mind hemm qiegħda - imma ma tirrealizzax kemm hemm bżonn... li f’dal-pajjiż hawn tfal qed jgħixu u jkun f’din iċ-ċirkustanza... ma tirrealizzax.

‘Can I use the word? Shock! In fact, I do not even have photos. I deleted everything! There were so many physical needs that...it’s not that I do not wish to remember, because they are still at the back of my mind...but...that in this country there are children living in these circumstances...you wouldn’t even realise’

Natasha p.13: Lanqas tibda timmagina l-feelings li jkun hemm fil-biological parents, in spite of their difficulties and their decisions, xhin joħdulhom dawn it-tfal.

‘In spite of their difficulties and decisions, I couldn’t even begin to imagine the feelings experienced by the biological parents during the moment their children were taken away from them’

Joan p.5: Kont noqgħod attenta li ma niltaqgħux magħhom.

‘I used to be attentive to avoid meeting them’

Joan p.6: Naħseb trid taċċetta anki l-familji tagħhom.

‘I think that you have to accept their families’

Romina p.6: Ahna għandna a good relationship; kien hemm drabi meta ħriġnieha m'ommha, ħriġnieha magħna; anki f'birthdays tat-tfal, nagħmlilha kejk, tiġi ommha, tiġi n-nanna u z-zijiet... imma kollox within boundaries.

'We have a good relationship. There are times when we took her out with her mother; even during birthdays, we would bake a cake and invite her mum, grandmother and aunts...however this all must take place within boundaries'

Natasha p.17: Jien għalhekk lilhom dejjem ngħidilhom li l-ħajja ma tajthilekx jien; il-mummy għamlet il-biċċa tagħha, tatek il-ħajja.

'I always told them that I was not the one to give them life. Mummy gave her contribution and gave you life'

Natasha p.17: U meta kien ikollha l-baby kont nibgħatilha xi pakkett nappies, xi body wash għaliha, affarijiet li forsi tgħid hi ma tixtrihomx għaliha bħal xi deodorant... kienet, hekk, tapprezza ħafna

'And when she had her baby, I used to send her a packet of nappies, a body wash for her, and some items that she might not buy for herself such as deodorant...She used to appreciate this a lot'

Joan p.12: Jekk ma tkunx lesta għal dan it-trouble... jiena spiċċajt imtlejt bl-ansjetà, ħruq fl-istonku. Issa ssetiljajna ħafna iżjed. Iċ-ċans li jibqa' hawnhekk dejjem kiber. Imma iebes! Issa l-każ tiegħi kien hekk; forsi każijiet oħra mhumiex.

'If you are not ready for this trouble...I ended up with lots of anxiety, stomach burns. Now we are more settled. The chance of him remaining here have always grew. But this was hard. This was my case but, perhaps, other situations are not like this'

Joan p.12: Imma xorta worth it!

'It is still worth it!'

Stephen p.25: Xi ħaġa li dejqitni hi l-għajjat. It-tnejn. Maaa! Ma nifilħux.

'Something that bothered me was the shouting. Both of them. Maaa! I couldn't stand it.'

Joan p.25: Joghġbuk għax huma ħelwin. L-imħabba li juruk, hekk...

'You like them because they are sweet. The love that they show you is just something...'

Romina p.20: Mhuwiex plain sailing. Huwa sabiħ u ta' sodisfazzjon kbir. Jien nerga' naghmilha għal mitt darba.

'It is not plain sailing but it's nice and of great satisfaction. I would do it again for a hundred times'

Charles p.7: Imma tieħu pjaċir għax tarah idoqq il pjanu u hekk, tieħu veru pjaċir għax tgħid dan speċi qed jibrilla f'xi haġa li kieku baqa' fejn kien żgur ma kienx, qas ixommhom dawn l-affarijiet.

'I enjoy seeing him play the piano. I often say that he is excelling at something that, if he remained where he was, this wouldn't even have been possible'

Charles p.12: Ir-relazzjonijiet, il-ħbiberiji, kemm kapaċi jikkellmu t-tfal, kif kapaċi jesprimu ruħhom.

'Relationships, friendships, ability to communicate with children and how they express themselves'

Romina p.14: Kulma taf illum nista' ngħid b'wiċċi minn quddiem li għallimnihulha aħna. So, xi rrid aktar mill-ħajja?

'I feel comfortable to say that all that she knows today is because we taught it to her. What more can I want in life?'

Natasha p.32: Ikun hemm affarijiet li m'intix qed tipparentja waħdek fil-fostering hux, ikun hemm affarijiet oħra qed jinfluwenzaw.

'There are things in fostering that make you realise that you are not parenting, there are other influencing factors'

Nicholas p.7: mhumiex tagħna, trid toqgħod attent x'taġmel għax jekk tiżbalja.

'Are not ours, you must be attentive in what you do because if you make a mistake...'

Romina p.7: Jien għandi problema waħda bit-tfal, waħda kbira però: li b'mod eżagerat jigdbu, u dil-ħaġa lili twerwirni; m'għandix kelma oħra - twerwirni. Għalkemm għaddejjin minn counselling, imma lili xorta żżommni on an edge. Għax mil-lum għal għada tista' tivvinta xi haġa fuqi u taqlagħli xi waħda.

'I have one problem with the children, a big one though! That they lie excessively, and this terrifies me. Although we are attending counselling, this situation keeps me on an edge. It could be that, randomly, she invents something, and this would create a situation'

Romina p.9: Ovvjament ir-relazzjoni tagħna ħassitha.

‘Obviously, the relationship was impacted’

Charles p.37: Nara li għandna ħafna inqas ħin għal xulxin u għalina nfusna weħidna.

‘We have less time for each other and also less time to ourselves’

Natasha p.23: Jien naħseb li fil-verità it enriched it. Anki l-fatt li meta jkunu żgħar tmur u teħodhom il-festi, anki jekk ma tkunx thobb ħafna l-festi, u narah refagħhom fuq dahru, pereżempju; qisu it brings out these aspects of a person’s personality. Parenting brought out aspects of his personality that I think wouldn’t have been brought out.

‘It has enriched it. The fact that, when they are young and, for instance, you would take them to a feast. Even if you don’t like them much, I would see him [Charles] carrying them on his back. It brings out these aspects of a person’s personality. Parenting brought out aspects of his personality that I think wouldn’t have been brought out’

Joan p.8: Sar iktar nervuż... imma beda jagħmel affarijiet li qabel ma kienx jagħmel... sar iktar jilgħab. Stephen iħobb jikkuntentahom it-tfal.

‘He became more nervous, however, he started doing things the he did not do before. He became more playful. Stephen enjoys making the children happy’

Stephen p.22: Konna iktar trankwilli.

‘We were more tranquil’

Joan p.9: Inqas ħin biex nitkellmu; argumenti jiżdiedu. Hemm iktar affarijiet ma’ xiex trid tlaħħaq.

‘Having less time to speak, arguments increased. There are more things to keep up with’

Romina p.12: Għalkemm ikun hemm rabja u anki ftit supervja, imbagħad we both think about it u we find the best way forward.

‘Although we would be angry, we would both think about it and find the best way forward’

Charles p.41: iżjed ma tara l-affarijiet esagerati, iżjed imbagħad ikollok problema ssib soluzzjoni.

‘The more exaggerated you perceive a situation, the more problematic it would be to find a solution’

Nicholas p.15: U ġieli anke titlaq għax-xogħol, iċċempilli u tgħidli hekk, hekk u hekk bit-telefown.

'Sometimes she leaves for work and on the way there she would call me to discuss different matters'

Natasha p.24: Nahseb imbagħad, meta ġew it-tfal, jien immaturajt bil-motherhood.

'Since the children arrived, I became more mature with motherhood'

Natasha p.40: Nahseb għar-relazzjoni importanti li dejjem jibqa' jkun hemm hin għar-relazzjoni tal-koppja, apparti r-relazzjoni tal-koppja bħala parents.

'Apart from the relationship as parents, it is very important that time is found for the couple's relationship'

Natasha p.25: għamilnieha tagħna għax ma għandniex tagħna.

'You made her yours because you don't have your own'

Charles p.26: Ahna kull ġimgħa konna nibagħtu update ta' x'inhu jiġri d-dar, x'inhu jiġri wara l-aċċess, kienet toħloq hafna stress hux, għax inti qed tipprowa tasal xi mkien. Taf li minhabba li huma mhux qed jemmnu il-ħsara ser tkompli tikber.

'Every week we would send an update on what is happening at home, what happens after access...this created a lot of stress, and you'd wish to arrive somewhere with this. However, since they were not believing us, the damage is going to continue growing'

Natasha p.28: Kont infakkar lili nnifsi li rrid noqgħod naqra attenta kif nippreżenta ċerti affarijiet għax jistgħu jiġu misinterpreted.

'Remind myself that I need to be more attentive in the way I present certain information because it could be misinterpreted'

Natasha p.11: Qisek thossok left out and that your role as a parent is not being respected. You are just being treated as one of the people who provide the services for this child.

'You feel left out and that your role as a parent is not being respected. You are just being treated as one of the people who provide the services for this child'

Natasha p.10: U taraha t-tifla ġejja mdamdma mill-aċċess.

'Seeing her return back defeated after access'

Joan p.7: Ġieli damu siegħa wara l-bieb biex ikaxkruh u joħduh. U allura int tiġbor kolloxx fl-istonku tiegħek biex tara kif se jmur, kif se jiġi...fhimt?

'They [supervisors for access] sometimes spent an hour behind our door to drag him out. I would bottle up my worries, awaiting to see how access turned out and to see the state he would return back in'

Charles p.3: Imma jiġifieri konna nafu għal xix deħlin, ma qtajniex qalbna imma jiġifieri qisu il-biza iżjed minn dil-ħaġa milli għax ha ġġib tarbija jew tifel jew tifla.

'We knew what we were going in for and we did not give up. Therefore, the fear is more about this thing rather than because you're going to welcome a newborn or a child'

Romina p.15: Naħseb l-ikbar drawback li għandna llum il-ġurnata u li tifrustrani hija s-safar, dik hija xi ħaġa li ma nistax għaliha.

'I think that the biggest drawback we still face today, that frustrates me, is to go abroad. It is something that I could not stand'

Stephen p.11: Battalja l-ħin kollu.

'Constant battle'

Nicholas p.11: Differenti għalkollox hux, trid tagħmel pass, tista' tagħmlu minn jeddek mhux trid toqgħod tiddependi minn fuq ħaddieħor, fuq kolloxx.

'Completely different. If you want, you can take a step on your own and not depend on someone else for everything'

Charles p.24: Illi qed jistennew li inti dejjem b'saħħtek.

'Expects that you are always strong'

Natasha p.2: Anki jekk it-tfal ma jkollhom xejn x'jaqsmu miegħek bid-demm, ma jfissirx that you can't parent them.

'Even if children are not blood related, it doesn't mean that you can't parent them'

Joan p.21: Ghax inti f'ghajnejk mhux se tarahom bhala tfal fostered, imma bhala t-tfal tieghek.

'In your eyes you're not going to see them as foster children, but as your own children'

Natasha p.5: I will protect her'... b'qawwa... mhux biss ghax it was my first experience as a parent, but also because of where she was coming from.

'I will protect her with all my might. Not just because it was my first experience as a parent, but also because of where she was coming from'

Natasha p.32: Nahseb hadd mhu qieghed f'pozizzjoni li joffri to the full l-openness u l-energija li ghandek bzonn biex tiehu hsieb tfal ta' haddiehor daqs xi hadd li m'ghandux tieghu. Jien narana li ahna nistghu naghtuhom daqshekk lil dat-tfal propju ghax ma kellniex taghna.

'I think that no one else is in a better position to offer to the full, with openness and energy, to care for other people's children as much as someone who doesn't have his own children. I think that we are able to give them this much because of the fact that we did not have our own children!'

Charles p.10: Imma inti tipprova taghmel xi haga biex dat-tfal, imsieken, ma jibqghux fis-sitwazzjoni li qeghdin fiha. Trid taghtihom opportunita biex ikunu adulti kompleti.

'Your efforts are to try and support these unfortunate children from remaining in the same situation. You try and give them the opportunity to be complete adults'

Romina p.21: Ghalkemm xi kultant iwegghuni... u nibki u naqa' hazin u jiddispjacini. Imma mbaghad xorta nghid, 'Imma li kieku m'ghamiltx hekk, x'sar minnhom it-tfal?'

'Although they hurt me sometimes, and I would cry and feel bad about it, I still ask myself: 'But if I hadn't taken this step, what would have happened to these children?'

Natasha p.14: Beautiful, hux! Despite her knowing, and I too, that I am not her natural mother.

'It was beautiful! Despite her knowing, and I too, that I am not her natural mother'

Romina p.10: Jekk ma jkunx hemm koperazzjoni bejn il-koppja, ma jsir xejn. Ghax trid tkun katina. It-tfal huma add-ons mal-katina, imma l-katina trid tahdem bejnietna.

'If there isn't cooperation between the couple, nothing will happen. You must be like a chain. The children are add-ons to the chain, however, the chain must function between ourselves'

Natasha p.27: Is-sapport tal-partner jibqa' importanti ħafna.

'Your partner's support remains very important'

Charles p.14: Bilfors trid taħdem flimkien għax inkella tispicċa.

'You must work together otherwise it's over'

Joan p.4: Li kellna skill sets differenti għenitna.

'Having different skills sets helped us'

Joan p.14: Kont 'qas naf nagħmel harqa jien. Imnalla kien Stephen.

'I didn't even know how to do a nappy and I was fortunate to have Stephen'

Stephen p.11: Dejjem sibna l-ghajnuna, daqqa t'ommha u missierha, u daqqa t'ommi u missieri.

'We always found help, sometimes from her parents and sometimes from mine'

Romina p.10: Il-kunjata dejjem ibbekkjatna. Kif kont inċemplilha kienet taħrab. Toqgħod 'il bogħod minn hawn; imma anki b'tal-linja... kienet tinzel! p.10 Romina: Imnalla kien hemm hi. Jekk aħna bħala koppja għamilna ħafna affarijiet, il-kunjata għamlet daqsna. Hi l-aktar persuna li għenitna, fil-verità.

'She always backed us up. As soon as I would call she would escape whatever she was doing. She lives far from here, but she would still come here even if she had to catch a bus. She is the person that helped us the most in reality'

Romina p.10: Żgur li f'każijiet ta' emergenza jkun hemm xi hadd li jagħtik daqqa t'id... ġieli anki fit-tindif tad-dar.

'In cases of emergency there needs to be that one person that can give you practical support, sometimes even some help around the house'

Joan p.11: Għenuni ħafna shabi; jien ma kien kelli xejn għall-bidu, lanqas flokk.

'My friends supported me a lot. At the beginning I didn't even have a t-shirt!'

Natasha p.45: Li jkollok xi hadd inti, issa jkunx il-counselling, ikunx l-ispiritual director, li inti taf li tista' tmur titkellem ma' din il-persuna u tiżbroffa, u jekk inti kien hemm ġurnata

fejn għidt: ‘Ara xi żball għamilt’, tista’ tgħidha mingħajr ma tkun judged. Forsi mal-formal system ma tagħmilhiex, forsi, taf kif, għax jgħidu, ma jmurx ipoġġu question mark, għax inti l-fostering jagħmillek din naqra incertezza, fhimt?

‘Be it a counsellor or a spiritual director, at least you know that you can go and speak with this person and let out your feelings without feeling judged. Perhaps you may not do this with the formal support system in fear that they may question your ability to foster, there is this uncertainty’

Natasha p.42: Il-mummy kienet għadha b’saħħitha iżjed, ovyja tnax-il sena ilu, kien għadha fuq is-60s għax issa l-mummy għandha 78, kienet tgħinna hafna iktar milli issa tista’ tgħinna.

‘My mum was stronger back then, obviously this was twelve years ago when she was still in her sixties. However, now, my mother is seventy-eight years old. She used to help us more back then than she could now’

Natasha p.29: Kien hemm żmien meta jiena mort għat-terapija biex niehu hsieb tiegħi nnifsi għax ġieli f’dal-kaos kollu - min qed jgħid hekk fuq din... u min iċemplu mill-iskola - jien ġieli kelli bżonn nerga’ nipproċessa l-affarijiet.

‘There was a time when I went to therapy to take care of myself because, often, in all of this chaos, I needed to process things’

Charles p.16: Forsi mhux dejjem il-komunikazzjoni tkun eżatta, jiġifieri kellna niehdu anke għajnuna jiġifieri mal-professjonisti għax jiġifieri tant nibdew ma naqblux u għax imbagħad kollox tibda ma taqbilx.

‘We would disagree over so many things that we needed to seek help from professionals’

Joan p.3: Esperjenza sabiha. Għax inti f’għajnejk m’intix se tarah bħala fostered; qisni dak li kont nagħmel ma’ tiegħi, qed nagħmlu miegħu. Investejt ruhi kompletament fih.

‘It’s a nice experience because, in your eyes, you’re not going to see the child as fostered. What I was going to do with my own, I am doing it with him. I invested myself completely in him’