

Once he's happy, I'm happy

by Patrick

Patrick talks about the experience of being the parent of a child in care.

Seeing his son being taken into care

It was the best day of my life when he was born but then, like, he was in my care and my partner's for 11 months, and then it just went pear-shaped after that. You know, it's very hard. It's very hard to let them take your child.

It was a shock to the system because he was with an elderly couple first, but obviously, because he was only a baby at the time, you couldn't keep him there, so then he went to another family. At first, meeting them and having been to the house, seeing it, knowing where he was sleeping, at first my reaction was, *I don't want him here, I want him home, I don't want him being here, this is like – nah*. But then I got to know them as time went on.

I was told that his mother had more rights than I had. Literally, she had full rights and I was just a piece of dirt. I went to court for three years solid, non-stop, trying to get him back on my own. It's not easy, it's not easy you know. Because even for people from the outside looking in, who've never gone through it, they find it very hard to understand why. I say, *unless you've done a mile in my shoes, don't preach to me about that*. And they're like, *okay, fair enough*.

Finding the Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care

At first, I didn't want to come here. I didn't want to do nothing. I just wanted to give up. It was my ex-partner that actually got me on to the service, 'cos she has other kids in care, too. I said, *no, I just want to curl up in the corner and just leave me alone*. Literally, I broke down crying before I came here. And the woman I broke down to was actually a part of Clarecare. Lovely woman, she was always a good help to me and she was always great with my son. Other than that, it was hard. It was hard. Because I'd be thinking in my own mind, *oh what if there are people there that I know? I don't want to go there, I don't want people knowing my business, I'll keep it all to myself*. But I got up one morning, and just shrugged it off and went, *Right. I have to do something about this*. The first day I stepped in the front door here and went into the room, that was it. I haven't stopped talking since!

It wasn't even mentioned by Tusla about this advocacy group. Only for I knew, from the ex-partner and a family member, that the service was there, I wouldn't be here. And that's where the communication breaks down, you know – between Tusla and parents. They should give the parents information about other services out there, but they don't.

I was one of the lucky ones. I got great support here, you know, over the last 12 or 13 years, but it was hard at the start. But, like, my son gives me all the courage to fight and keep going and I take every day as it comes. I've come a long way since I got into the group. I've done a lot of research, still thinking of my son the whole way through it, putting him first. Only for him I wouldn't be doing this. I'm going back to college and that, so I can do more stuff like this, to keep him going and myself going. And obviously, hopefully, someday he'll come back through the door you know – hopefully.

Offering advice and help to others

A lot of people do ask me questions and stuff, a lot of people do, around kids and care and stuff like that. Well, it's a bit hard because I really don't know what to say, because a lot of them are only freshly coming into the system, so I say, *ah look, it's going to be hard, it is going to be hard*. I try not to be blunt. I say *look, it is going to be hard but there is support out there*. And I give them the number for reception here.

You know, as much as we like to try to help everybody, we can't. So, I just tell them, *look, just breathe, meditate, do something and just relax. You'll get through it*. There's a friend of mine now inside as well, she lost her children to care and she was asking me, how did you do it? I said, *go there [Clarecare], you know talk to them, they'll put you on the right track*. And I mentioned the advocacy group here and the one in Limerick and the one in North Tipperary. But I told her that anywhere else in the country you won't get a service like that.

I did a bit of counselling myself at the start. And I suppose just breathing. I say, *just breathe*. And try not to lose it. You know, try not to go crazy. Just keep thinking of the kids. If it takes you ten years, just keep fighting it and keep going. It is hard, though. All you can do is keep the bright side up and keep going. So, it worked out great for me that way, but other people are still sour. You know, it's hard for people, for someone to come in and take their kids. Whether it's one, or whatever, it's very hard.

Relationships and communication

They're giving me more leeway with my child now than they did. I have him on a Saturday sometimes, every couple of weeks, and that's great 'cos it's working out between me and the foster carers then. The social worker has to take a step back. They're not involved as much as they were. Myself and the foster carers have a bit more leeway just 'cos we're communicating, you know? If I want to see my child, say, I'll give a little text or a phone call, and it works that way. And it makes me kind of happy that they've stepped back a bit. But over the years I've got to learn where they're coming from as well. Not everyone knows where they're coming from, either, you know? You just think, *ah they're devils, they're coming to take our kids*. A lot of people still look at them like that. I think they [the social workers] just need to put the parents at ease rather than coming in the door and grabbing the kids and going, you know, with forty million guards outside the door. But in my case, thank God, I didn't have a guard outside my door.

But I suppose not every parent is in the same situation as I'm in. Sometimes you don't get on with the social worker, sometimes you don't get on with foster carers and stuff like that, but I'm blessed with the people I have in my life and my son's life. I've great communication with the foster carers. That's a key, it's very key for everyone to get in with the foster carers rather than fight with them. So, it kind of works both ways, I work with them and they work with me and we're all kind of happy and my son is the centre of attention then. Once you have a great working relationship with the foster parents, everything works great. And just keep checking in with them.

Like, I communicate better with the foster carers than I do with Tusla. For instance, the social worker that my son has, she's more of a texting woman. I'd rather pick up the phone and listen, because some parents will take it up wrong. There could be something said in a text message that people will take up wrong. I've often taken things up wrong myself. But it wasn't meant in a bad way or anything like that. I think Tusla need to pick up the phone more often. Just a simple little phone call saying, *how's things going?* Little things like that. Like, for instance, if something happened, instead of the foster carers telling me, you know, I would like Tusla to pick up the phone. Because they're still involved, and they will be involved in his life until he's 18. You know, a simple little, *this happened today, or that happened*, especially if the foster carers couldn't get through to me, they should pick up the phone. But you've got so many children in care, too, and they're trying to look after everyone.

The future

In my case, the foster carers are like family now. You know, I look at them as family. Because they have reared my son for the last 11 years, nearly 12. And they're doing a fantastic job with him, like. He's doing great at school, he's eating, sleeping, doing everything. Doing everything that a 13-year-old boy should be doing. Well, apart from getting in trouble!

He does his own little garden patch and if anyone goes near it, he'll give out, but other than that, he does everything around the house for them. He'd do anything for them. I'm happy with that. I just hope things keep going the way they are and, you know, I'm happy enough with it. At the moment, he wants to see me more, now that he's getting a bit older. I don't mind, I'd have him every day of the week but I have to still go by Tusla. But if he decided on his 18th birthday, *I'm going to go and live with my dad*, my door is always open. I'll provide a home for him and make sure everything's there for him, whatever he needs and any support he needs.

Once he knows I'm not giving up, that's all that matters. He knows that, I've told him that, *I'm not giving up. I'm not going to let you walk away*. He said, *okay dad*, and that was it and he just went off. Whether it stuck in his head or not after that I don't know, but every time I have him, I tell him that. *I'm not giving up, I'm always here*.

Once he's happy, I'm happy. It's all that matters.

As told to Niamh Barrett, *Foster* editor. The author's name has been changed.

About Clarecare

Clarecare is a not-for-profit organisation in County Clare, established in 1968. The agency delivers a broad range of community-based support services for children and families, adults experiencing addiction and older people in need of day care services, home care and social work. The Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care is one of the family support services provided by Clarecare, and it aims to support parents' participation in the care process, for the wellbeing of their children. The service offers individual and group support to parents whose children are in the care of Tusla–Child and Family Agency (foster care or residential care) in County Clare. More information on the Clarecare Advocacy Service is available at www.clarecare.ie, by phone on 065-6828178 or via email at info@clarecare.ie