

# Fostering unaccompanied asylum seeking children

**Sylvie\***

Sylvie fostered two boys from Iraq when they arrived in the UK at different points in 2011. They came into her foster care aged 11 and 15, although now, despite being over 18, both young men still live with her under a 'Staying Put' arrangement. Sylvie also provides respite for several other Iraqi boys in her placement's friendship group.

## Why did Sylvie become a foster carer?

Sylvie had always felt comfortable with children as she has a background in teaching, particularly in infant schools. She and her husband took the decision to foster while her husband was volunteering at a children's home abroad.

## How did Sylvie feel about fostering unaccompanied asylum seeking children?

Sylvie naturally had some reservations about taking in unaccompanied asylum seeking children. She was concerned about whether they would be accepted by her friends and family. Language and cultural barriers were also a consideration for her. She needn't have worried however, as her friends and family took the boys straight to their hearts. Communication was not as difficult as it may have seemed, as it quickly became a source of much amusement on both sides. Although it could be tricky at times, there were always interpreters, Google translate, and other local young people who spoke their language who could help.

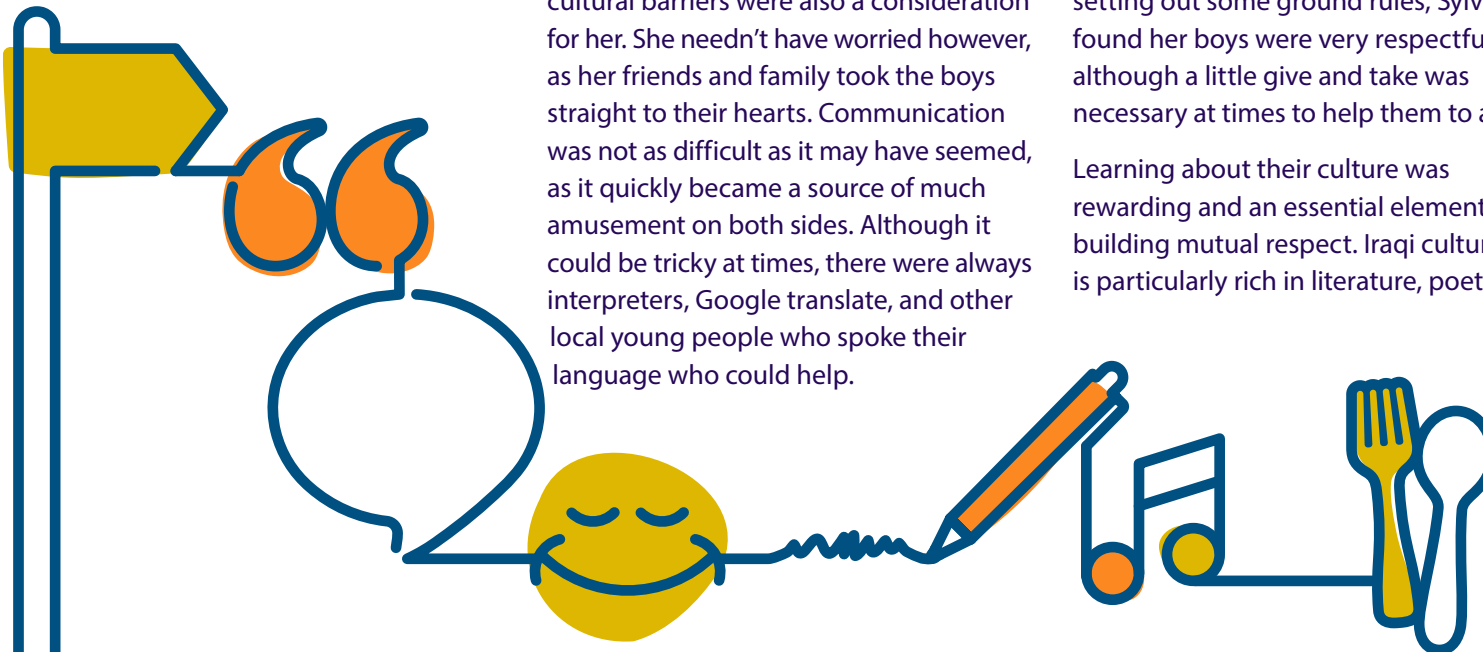
## Were there any particular challenges?

As with any placement, there are always a few issues that need to be addressed. Unaccompanied asylum seeking children have often travelled vast distances on their own with little support and aren't used to house rules and curfews. After setting out some ground rules, Sylvie found her boys were very respectful although a little give and take was necessary at times to help them to adapt.

Learning about their culture was rewarding and an essential element in building mutual respect. Iraqi culture is particularly rich in literature, poetry,

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music and crafts and Sylvie is also a fan of the cuisine. She advises getting a cookbook and having a go at preparing a traditional meal, as it is always really appreciated. Becoming familiar with her boys' culture was a great way of understanding them and overcoming initial challenges.



Mental health and physical health issues can be more prevalent in this cohort of children due to their unique circumstances, so it is advisable to see a doctor for a health check-up, get mental health training and build up a good network. Sylvie studied extensively with MIND, a mental health charity, which helped her to understand some of the issues that her boys had been through. Another challenge when caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking children can be getting them into education, so it is important to persevere and draw on your support network when necessary.

The asylum process can be traumatic and cause great distress for children. Sylvie experienced this with her young

people. She said that it is important to be a strong advocate and to be able to challenge solicitors and interpreters when necessary. These visits can be particularly distressing for them as they are required to recount their story and provide evidence to support their claims. Sylvie wished that she had understood more about how trauma affects the brain before they went through the asylum process, as it can affect what a person remembers and in what sequence. After visits to the solicitor or the asylum offices in Croydon, she found that arranging little treats, such as cooking a favourite meal or going for a walk along the beach, were helpful to reduce the stress. Fortunately, both of her boys were given refugee status and the right to remain in the UK.

## Support network

Having a good network is very important. Sylvie had support from several groups, notably MIND as well as introductions to Islamic culture which gave her useful insights into their religion and what behaviours she could expect from her boys. She also felt lucky to have a great social worker who made them all feel at ease and who would answer the phone whenever she had a problem. One of her boys was able to see a trauma counsellor very quickly which was particularly helpful as he was suffering from residual mental health issues. Sylvie also found that, as well as finding support for the children she cares for, it has also been important to get support for herself. She

has regular contact with other foster carer families with unaccompanied asylum seeking children who all support each other and offer practical advice. Finding a 'Buddy' or friend who can help support you can be really helpful.



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## Advice to potential foster carers

**Take the step to foster an unaccompanied asylum seeking child, although check how your support network feels before making a decision. A foster carer has to be ready to stand up for the child, willing to learn along the way and doing it for the right reasons. Fostering my two Iraqi boys has been a very rewarding experience, they have brought a rich culture to my life that I would never have experienced otherwise. Fostering these children may not be a bed of roses, but it can enrich your life no end.**