

PEOPLE

THE
MUMTHE
AUNT

All she wants are her foster parents

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One child. Two sets of parents.

And because of a feud that has started among the adults, the child is now stuck in a foster home.

We will call the 12-year-old Mary. The real names of Mary and her four parents have been changed to protect her identity.

Given away

When she was still a baby, Mary was given away to her aunt and was raised knowing that she has four parents.

But things turned ugly last year when Mary's biological and foster parents began accusing each other of bad parenting and child abuse.

For the past eight months, she has been in a children's home under a care and protection order by the Ministry of Social and Family Development pending the conclusion of police investigations into the abuses.

So distressed was she that she sneaked handwritten letters through classmats to her foster parents, Mr and Mrs A.

Because of the spat, her biological parents, Mr and Mrs B, forbade her from meeting her foster parents.

Mary was supposed to be studying for her PSLE but was so upset that she took to writing pleading letters, asking Mrs A to find a way out.

In one letter, she wrote: "Help me! Please get me out of here!"

Another read: "I don't want to live with anyone else besides you."

There are another five more handwritten letters, all pleading for Mr and Mrs A to "save her" from the children's home.

"Her words broke our hearts," Mrs A tells The New Paper on Sunday in a teary interview from her Yishun flat.

Mrs A recounts that Mary's mother asked her to look after the child. "She said she would not have time to look after the child as she had to work to earn money as a cashier in a club."

So, Mrs A leapt at the opportunity as the couple was childless at that time and had been trying unsuccessfully for a baby, she says.

There was no paperwork signed to formalise the handing over of the baby, says Mrs A.

"All she told me was, 'I want you to look after

PLEA: A letter that Mary wrote, saying "Please, I want to go home to Mama".

TNP PICTURE:
ARIFIN JAMAR



my child." And for 11 years, Mr and Mrs A did just that.

Mrs A, a housewife, and Mr A, a sales promoter who makes \$4,000 each month, raised Mary as if she were their own.

They described Mary as a cheerful and smart child.

Says Mr A: "We love her dearly and we have always considered her as our daughter, even after we had our own children."

Mary identified her foster parents as Papa and Mama, and her biological parents as Baba and Mummy.

All her education- and health-related expenses were paid for by the foster family, said Mrs A.

Confrontation

But the relationship between the two sides soured when they came to live together in the same Bedok flat in 2011.

At that time, Mr and Mrs B were divorced while the foster family had sold their flat and were looking for a place to stay.

Mrs A alleges that Mrs B would neglect Mary and punish her physically.

When contacted for her side of the story, Mrs B alleges that Mrs A was very "controlling". "I would see bruises and pinch marks on Mary's legs and face."

The adults also quarrelled over money.

Guardianship

Eventually, both sides agreed that the foster family would give up guardianship of Mary to Mrs B after last December.

There are differing accounts on both sides, but some money changed hands to allow this to happen.

Mrs B also forbade Mary from contacting Mrs A.

But in the two months after Mrs B took over raising her daughter, she started experiencing issues.

Says Mrs B: "Mary knows that I am her mother, yet she is very rude and rebellious towards me. She doesn't listen to me even when I tell her nicely."

There is a litany of complaints the parents have against each other including details of who owes whom money, and how each has interfered in the other's life. The police were called in once to settle a confrontation between the two parties after Mary sneaked out to spend time with Mrs A despite Mrs B's disapproval and instructions otherwise.

Since February, Mary has been in a foster home pending police investigations into the abuse claims.

Mrs B says she is visited often and came home last week.

Says Mrs B: "I am the natural mother and, of course, I love her. As a mother, I want her to grow up and learn from this unhappy situation."

"I wouldn't want her to suffer in the foster home. I tell her it is only for the time being."

Resolution

While showing photos of happier times on her mobile phone, Mrs B told this reporter: "I have no regrets giving Mary up in the past because of work. My only regret is that it turned out this way."

When asked whether both sides can come to an agreement for Mary, Mrs A and Mrs B say that a solution would be for Mrs A to formally adopt her.

Says Mrs A: "She is like our own daughter already so we want to adopt her. We have prepared and submitted all the documents, it is up to my sister to give her consent now."

Mrs B tells TNPS: "Yes, I love my daughter very much but I will respect her decision. I just want to make sure Mrs A can take full responsibility of her."

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— Mrs A, Mary's foster mother, who is also her aunt

Bond between child and foster parents is strong

"It is the worst case scenario for the child," one psychiatrist says of Mary's case.

This is because her foster and biological parents have an informal arrangement with each other instead of a legally binding one, explains Dr Lim Boon Leng, a consultant psychiatrist at the Gleneagles Hospital.

He says: "The child is already confused over who her actual parents are. Such a child caught in the middle of a quarrel will probably feel responsible for causing it."

"Both sides are indispensable to the child's growth."

He tells The New Paper on Sunday that cases of informal arrangements between parents and their relatives were common in the past, where having a large number of children was a normal occurrence.

It can be a cause for conflict as the biological parents still have a legal right to be the child's guardians, he adds.

"If the parents exercise that right when the child has found attachment to his guardians, there can be problems as this attachment is a very strong one," says Dr Lim.

"Stopping this attachment will cause anxiety and loss to the child."

"If both sides fight over the child, it can traumatise her and she may be predisposed to anger management issues or anxiety disorders later in life."

The biological parents who want to reclaim the child will likely become frustrated and impatient as they may not understand the child's yearning for the foster parents, too.

Says Dr Lim: "The parents should understand that the bond between the foster parents and the child can never be broken altogether."

Singapore Children's Society director of youth services, Dr Carol Balhetchet, likens the love between the child and the foster parents as a "deeply rooted plant".

Says Dr Balhetchet: "These are the people who have given the child love, security and sustenance. Uprooting this plant and taking it to another environment will not end well."

It is worse when a dispute happens as the child will think she is "the wedge in the family", she adds.

In dispute cases such as Mary's, she believes that putting the child in a children's home is a good option.

"The child will feel safer someplace else and far away from the dispute which she may feel responsible for," she says.

"After all, the objective is to wait for the battle to be over and for calm to resume before sending her back to the family."