

the kitchen, washing-machine and living-room whenever he wanted.

I had ample supplies of bed sheets and towels, so Mark turned up with just two suitcases. With his arrival, suddenly my house became a home again: having someone to eat dinner with and chat to meant I was no longer alone – or lonely.

I thought it might be odd having Mark in Freddie's room, but I quickly got used to it. Freddie did grumble about having to sleep in the box-room on visits and the fact his leftover DVDs and clothes were packed away, but he too adjusted to the new regime.

My experience of having a lodger was so positive that when Mark resigned from his job 18 months later, I signed up to easyroommate.co.uk, which puts people in touch with potential housemates.

I've had six lodgers come and go since Mark left: foreign students, married couples, even a weightlifter! Mostly it's people looking for a nice, affordable place to live.

When Freddie finished university he offered to move back in, but after three years of living away from home we'd both done a lot of growing up – Freddie had his own life to lead, but just as importantly, I had mine!

I've really loved meeting people I might not otherwise have crossed paths with and although I don't live with my best friend anymore I've certainly made a lot of new ones!

'HELPING CHILDREN IS SO FULFILLING'

Maggie Martin, 61, lives in Leeds with her husband Graham, 63. They have two children, Allison, 39, and Phillip, 33.

When my youngest, Phillip, left home at 24 (yes, I'd managed to hold on to him for that long!) I suddenly felt redundant. I'd poured so many years into nurturing my children, so why let those skills go to waste? That's why I decided to consider becoming a foster-carer and my husband Graham agreed it was a great idea.

I called Leeds Social Services and after six months of health and police-checks – and five interviews – we were told we'd met their criteria. I was ecstatic.

The following year, a seven-year-old girl came to stay. Although I'd prepared

'I'D NURTURED MY CHILDREN. I DIDN'T WANT MY SKILLS TO GO TO WASTE'



Maggie and Graham have looked after 16 children since becoming foster-carers

for her arrival, blue-tacking Barbie posters on to the walls of her bedroom and stocking up on dolls, the reality was terrifying. She was an adorable little girl but nervous of her new surroundings. She refused to eat and I felt way out of my depth. How would I know what was best for her?

I quickly realised all I could do was treat her as though she were my own. So I'd take her to school, then we'd go to the park or spend hours colouring in. By the time she left us, eight months later, her confidence had sky-rocketed. I felt proud of myself for doing a good job.

We've had 15 more children since then. Some stay a few weeks, while one stayed for two years.

One nine-year-old boy really left his mark. The first night he stayed I made him a roast dinner. He'd never had one before and I'll always remember how his face lit up as I dished up.

When he left, they had to pry his arms from my waist and he vowed to visit when he turned 18. A year ago, he kept that promise by turning up on my doorstep, a happy and confident young man. It was wonderful to know I'd meant as much to him as he had to me.

Saying goodbye to them is never easy, but no matter how attached I get, I remind myself there's always another child who needs my help.

Fostering can be fraught with emotion, but seeing the difference you can make to a child's life is priceless.

couldyoufoster.org.uk

'I'VE GONE BARKING MAD FOR DOGS!'

Julie Davies, 53, lives in Bristol with husband Ian, 55. She has two grown up sons, Henry, 30, and George, 20.

After my eldest son Henry left home five years ago, I turned into a nightmare mum. I'd follow my youngest son George, then 15, around like a lost puppy, firing off questions like: 'Have you eaten enough?', or 'Where are you going tonight?'

Unsurprisingly, when it was his turn to fly the nest I was inconsolable.

Growing up, I'd always been a huge animal lover so, at first, I considered getting a companion for our Labrador Ellie. But I didn't want to help just one dog, I wanted to help hundreds. After a bit of research, I discovered animal fostering; looking after rescued animals while they waited to be rehomed.

A week spent promising Ian that I'd do all the work wasn't enough to convince him. It was only when I explained how pointless my life felt without the boys that he finally agreed.

I signed up to manytearsrescue.com, and two days later they sent someone to interview us. As volunteers we wouldn't be paid, but they'd provide the dog food.

Six weeks after George left home, a gorgeous Jack Russell Chihuahua-cross, called Charlie, took his place. He was only with us a couple of weeks before our next placement, Billy, a West Highland Terrier, arrived. I fell in love immediately (thankfully, Ian felt the same!) and he quickly became a permanent family member. But I vowed not to adopt another dog in case it prevented me from fostering.

I've now been fostering for two years and have looked after dozens of dogs. They've helped me get over my empty nest, but also made the boys visit more – these days I can hardly get rid of them! ☺



Julie gives her foster dog Fergal a cuddle