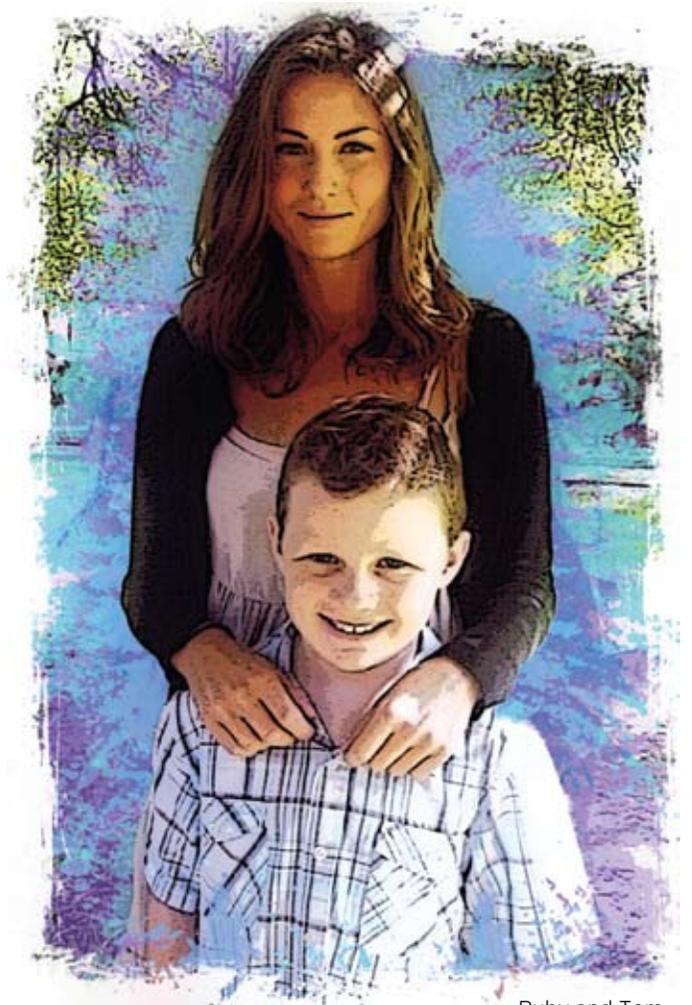


MATCH REPORT

Margaret Langdon looks at the sometimes life-changing friendships formed between children with special needs and volunteer helpers.



Ruby and Tom

Matchmaking isn't always about romance. Melbourne-based Extended Families Australia (EFA) uses its matchmaking skills to pair children with disabilities with a volunteer willing to provide ongoing friendship and support to the child and their family.

EFA manager Julie Langdon believes the service is about connecting people. "It's about facilitating relationships that are going to be supportive and meaningful for people," she says. "We see it as strengthening communities."

The not-for-profit organisation has a team of about 90 volunteers aged 18 to 80-plus who provide friendship to more than 100 children and their families. Langdon says there are about 200 families on the waiting list, and more volunteers are required.

EFA compares volunteers' interests, skills and expectations with those of potential matches, and provides training in areas such as first aid, EpiPen use, and dealing with challenging behaviours in children and young adults.

Once a suitable match is made, Langdon says the nature of the relationship then depends on the family's needs and what the volunteer can provide.

"There is some respite involved, but it's so much more than that," Mary says. "It's having someone there to share the joys and the challenges of raising a child with a disability. The sharing that takes place is very special. That's what Ruby's brought into our lives."

EFA has been helping children with special needs in and around Melbourne for more than 30 years. It formed in 1978 as the Foster Grandparents Scheme, in which grandparent volunteers visited children living in institutions. As social policies shifted from institutional care to a community-based focus, the volunteers began working with children living at home with families or carers. In 2003 the organisation was renamed Extended Families Australia to reflect the changed nature of the service and needs of families.

While there are still many grandparents involved, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters also comprise a large proportion of volunteers. One of the younger volunteers is 24-year-old Ruby, a friend for the past 18 months to 10-year-old Tom, who has autism and a mild-to-moderate intellectual disability.

"Ruby is like a member of our extended family," says Tom's mother, Mary*. "We're very easy and comfortable with each other. Tom and Ruby do lots of things like going to the cinema, bowling, and to Tom's tennis lessons. She's involved in many aspects of his life."

Ruby says the match brings her much joy. "It's the highlight of my week," she says. "They're a remarkable family, and it's a privileged position for me to be in, to be let into their lives and have such a close relationship with their children. I feel so lucky that we've come into each other's lives. It's very life enhancing."

Tom's parents say they're relieved the arrangement has worked out so well. The family was on EFA's waiting list for about three years and had doubts they'd find a suitable match, due to their son's complex needs. "Tom has many behavioural issues and challenges which at

times have been difficult for us," says Mary. "He has life-threatening food allergies, engages in risk-taking behaviours and is an active absconder, meaning he actively climbs fences to escape. We didn't really feel hopeful we would find someone like Ruby for him. He has high needs – yet it's been so successful."

Tom has two sisters – Lauren*, who is almost 12, and seven-year-old Chloe*. Mary says the girls have also benefited enormously from having Ruby in their lives. "The impact on them has been profound," she says. "Ruby isn't just a friend to Tom, but plays a real role in the girls' lives as a friend and mentor, relieving them of some of the responsibility and care for their brother and allowing them to just be children."

Mary and husband Andrew* also benefit from Ruby's involvement with the family. "There is some respite involved, but it's so much more than that," Mary says. "It's having someone there to share the joys and the challenges of raising a child with a disability. The sharing that takes place is very special. That's what Ruby's brought into our lives."

While the Volunteer Match Program, which brought Ruby and Tom together, remains the core of EFA's operations, the organisation offers many other services such as playgroups, parent and friendship groups, a group for Vietnamese-speaking parents and children, and family-fun days.

A new EFA program called Live Your Community aims to match a child with special needs to a volunteer who will help them develop their skills and confidence so they can engage in a sporting or leisure activity of their choice.

Langdon says the relationships that develop between volunteer, child and family benefit not only the child, but the volunteer too. "The classic statement we get from volunteers is, 'I came to this thinking I was going to give something to someone else, but I now feel like I'm the one getting more out of it,'" she says.

Mary wishes more families could find the support and special friendship her family shares with Ruby. "There are some very challenged families out there who could benefit greatly from a match," she says. "It's been life changing for all of us, Tom especially. It's so nice to see your child with severe autism showing an interest in someone else, and to see his excitement and anticipation before a visit. He so enjoys her and calls her 'his Ruby'." ●

*Name has been changed.