All in the family
The Cruses show that sharing fosters caring. By Bridget Fitzgerald

"I call myself foster care light," says Darrell Cruse, year 10 Community Action coordinator at Parade College in Bundoora. It's a modest description for a man who, with his wife Mary Jo, has spent more than seven years caring for children in need while raising three boys of their own.

The Cruse family has a stream of foster kids through the spare room of their East Keilor home. They take on children for days, weeks or months at a time.

Despite their young family, the couple relish in their role and reduce the number of children they care for only when things become unmanageable.

Mary Jo is pregnant with their fourth child, and suffering hip problems that often restrict her to a wheelchair.

"We have two kids one weekend a month at the moment," Darrell says.

"I see what other people do; there are people in their sixties who take on four children at a time, and two will have disabilities."

Darrell, 39, says he and his family are not doing anything special. They are just doing their best to help others, within their means.

Becoming foster carers was not a decision the Cruses made lightly. The couple share a strong sense of social justice and met volunteering at a soup van in Footscray. Before they had children, they talked to a local agency about foster care and went to information sessions before deciding to commit. The selection process took months and they were scrutinised. "They went through everything and produced a report; all our warts and all our good points."

One of their first assignments was to take on three young sisters, who stayed with Darrell and Mary Jo once a month for seven years.

"They were there through three births. They are like the sisters that our boys never had."

Darrell says he and Mary Jo discussed whether to expose their children, James, 7, Josh, 6, and David, 2, to a life of such uncertainty, but they decided taking on children from such varied backgrounds was an important experience for their boys.

"My kids are spoilt, middle-class white kids - they get everything they ask for," he says. "It just breaks up that normal a bit."

Although they have had difficult placements, and taking on extra children can mean some financial strain, Darrell says his family would not change their experience for anything.

Their new car will be an eight-seater to accommodate weekend guests, and they are thinking of building an extra room so there's always a place for a foster placement.

"For us it's a new thing, and for our boys it's just part of their life," Darrell says. "It will just always be part of our story."