



# Making friends after the fallout

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ARE STILL SUFFERING THE EFFECTS OF CHERNOBYL, 21 YEARS AFTER THE NUCLEAR DISASTER.

**ADAM WAKELIN MEETS ONE LEICESTERSHIRE FAMILY WHO HAVE BECOME FRIENDS OF CHERNOBYL'S CHILDREN**

**D**asha Letyago thinks hard. As she's thinking, straining over that familiar, unfathomable word, Dasha almost absent-mindedly gets up off the sofa and tucks herself into a small gap on the floor between the furniture.

"Chernobyl?" she repeats slowly. "What do I know about Chernobyl?"

"I have not been to Chernobyl," decides the 11-year-old, her pale face full of doubts. "It is not my home.

"There was an accident there? I know a little bit, maybe. Not much."

How much Dasha, a child growing up in the long shadow of the world's worst nuclear disaster, really understands, no one seems to know.

They hope that she will never have to face its full horror.

But that, like so many other things in this pretty little Belarusian girl's life, is clouded by toxic uncertainty.

Dasha couldn't be more different from most British kids, says Richard Sargeant, waving the way into his smart Queniborough home half-an-hour earlier.

She can't get enough fresh fruit, explains Richard's wife Zoe, she's a fussy spot for tidying up and she bookends every other sentence with an earnest "please" and "thank you".

"She's the perfect guest," says Richard, laughing off his children's theatrical groans as he turns off the TV "so we can hear ourselves think".

"We're hoping her good habits will rub off on our kids," he jokes, "but they've not so far, have they?"

Eight-year-old Freya and Claudia, who's a "big four", grin and shake their heads energetically. Hattie, the couple's other child, is playing in her room.

Dasha smiles an uncertain smile and inches across the settee towards Kseniya Sleath, a family friend who will be her translator for the afternoon.

"She's excited, but a little bit nervous," Kseniya explains. "Speaking to a journalist is a really big deal where she comes from. You have to be careful what you say."

Twenty-one years ago, at 1.23am on April 26, a series of explosions destroyed Reactor Four of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Ukraine.

It was most devastating man-made disaster in history, a radioactive nightmare which dumped the equivalent of 90

Hiroshima-sized bombs on swathes of western Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

Dasha was a decade away from being born, but she, like thousands of other "Chernobyl children", are still living with its poisonous legacy.

Belarus bore the brunt of Chernobyl, according to a World Bank study, and her home town of Gomel suffered the worst of the worst.

A senior doctor at Gomel children's hospital claims that as few as one in four babies are born healthy.

Genetic mutations, cancers and radiation-linked illnesses all take a terrible toll on youngsters.

Divorce, alcoholism and unemployment are rife in a society still sick from the fallout of that devastating day in 1986.

The Sargeants, like other families belonging to the East Leicestershire branch of the Friends of Chernobyl's Children charity, are giving Dasha and 17 other children a five-week break from all that.



**DEVASTATION:** The nuclear power station in Chernobyl

The youngsters all go to school in Queniborough during the day. They get health checks, they learn a bit of English, they get good food and, perhaps most importantly, they get double helpings of fun.

"I like to go bowling and swimming," says Dasha, speaking through Kseniya. "And I like McDonalds."

"My favourite," she beams, her big blue eyes lighting up, "was that place where you go from a slide into lots of little balls."

"That was Twinlakes," says Richard. "Put that in. We might get some more free tickets."

This is the fifth time Dasha has been to Leicestershire and the third time she has stayed with Richard and Zoe.

Initially, the Sargeants were a "buddy family", looking after kids for an evening or two.

Friends of Chernobyl's Children claims to have hard medical evidence that a month in the UK boosts youngsters' immune systems and extends

their life-spans by one or two years.

"I'm not sure about that," frowns Richard.

What's not in doubt is the lift given to children like Dasha by a bit of TLC and a bracing dose of boisterous family fun.

Understandably, neither Richard nor Zoe want to parade the intimate details of her personal life across a page of this newspaper, but she's had, they say, "a pretty rough time".

"There's a lot of residual pollution in Belarus," explains Richard, "and there is a lot of poverty. Alcoholism is fairly common and some of the family set-ups are heartbreaking."

Dasha lives in a cramped flat in Gomel with her grandmother, dad and step-mum.

"It is good," she shrugs. "It is good here and good there."

"My friends in Gomel think I am very lucky. They would like to come to England, too."

Dasha, whose favourite things are PE, the family's PS2 and Bratz cartoons, has blossomed since she started visiting Leicestershire.

"She was very timid when she first came to us," says Zoe.

"She was pretty skinny and looked quite deprived. You're not like that now, are you?"

"Her confidence has improved a lot and she looks a lot better in herself."

"When she's here, we treat her just like one of our children. They all get a kiss goodnight."

The couple paid out of their own pockets for Dasha to have an extra visit last Christmas.

"That was brilliant, really special," says Richard. "All our friends and family knew she was coming, so Dasha got as many presents as our kids."

"We gave her one present and she was over the moon. You should have seen her face when we told her the other 29 on the pile were hers," he chuckles.

The only bad thing about Dasha coming to stay, decides Freya, is having to say goodbye. "That's not nice," she says.

"We all get really, really sad and everyone cries."

Dasha benefits from being here, says Richard, but they get just as much out of her visits.

"When Zoe first suggested doing this, I wasn't sure," he says. "I know it sounds pretty corny, but it's nice to feel you're putting something back."

"Our kids learn a lot, too. It costs about £300 to bring a child over. That's nothing really, is it? Not when you see how much good it does them."



PICTURES: LIONEL HEAP / 655206-3

**HAPPY FAMILIES:** Dasha Letyago with her new best friends Freya, Hattie and Claudia Sargeant



PICTURE: 655206-6

**ON A HIGH NOTE:** Dasha with Richard and Zoe Sargeant

**Visit the websites below to make an on-line donation to Friends of Chernobyl's Children or find out more how you can get involved.**  
[www.charitychoice.co.uk](http://www.charitychoice.co.uk)  
[www.focc.org.uk](http://www.focc.org.uk)