



session 2

identity and life chances

Introduction

Each child who goes into foster care has a unique background and history, and foster carers are constantly challenged to work in the context of diversity. As mature adults, everyone needs a secure sense of personal identity grounded in the heritage of their birth family. Foster carers need to understand the value of the background children come from and help them to be proud of their identity.

As with all children, those in foster care can be seriously disadvantaged when they are unfairly discriminated against simply because of, for example, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religion. However, fostered children and young people may also endure personal abuse because they are regarded as different or simply because they are in care. This session is part of the preparation foster carers need in order to challenge unfair discrimination and, where necessary, be advocates on behalf of fostered children.

The themes of recognising diversity and dealing with unfair discrimination are examined in the context of personal identity. In order to ensure a common understanding, group members are introduced to definitions of the key terms: heritage, identity, prejudice, unfair discrimination and racism.

Aims of Session 2

- **To introduce the group to some of the experiences of young people who are separated from their families.**
- **To promote the importance of a secure sense of identity to children and young people.**
- **To explore the impact of prejudice and unfair discrimination on life chances.**

Key messages

- All young people have a history, and it is important for them to build a positive identity. It is essential to self-esteem.
- A child's heritage, in terms of language, culture, talents, religion and ethnic background, contributes powerfully to their sense of identity.
- Foster carers play an important part in helping young people to value and preserve their heritage.
- Fostered children and young people may suffer unfair discrimination because they are fostered, or because of ethnicity, religion, language, disability or other aspects of their identity.
- Foster carers have to recognise and challenge unfair discrimination and, where necessary, act as advocates for children and young people.
- We all have prejudices. Everyone involved in looking after other people's children has to be aware of their own prejudices and work to combat them when they may lead to unfairness.

SAMPLE MATERIAL - NOT TO BE REPRODUCED

activity 2.3 Being someone

25 mins

Why this activity?

To consider individual differences, and what this means for everyone.

What you will need

A selection of the **Diversity cards** (on *The Skills to Foster* CD-Rom); enough for participants to work in groups of three.

What to do

1. Tell the group that you want them to work in groups of three and that each group will be asked to produce some ideas about a picture of a child you are going to give them. Mention that each group will have a different picture and that the instructions for the activity are on each card. Make sure everyone has a pencil and paper.

trainer's tip

We have provided a selection of cards. They are designed to represent a number of different children and young people who may encounter prejudice for one reason or another. Before the session, you should take some time to look through these and select which ones you will use, depending upon the issues you would like participants to think about. These will differ according to the area in which you live, the needs of the participants and the needs of the children you will be placing with foster carers.

2. When everyone is in groups of three, get them to have a look at the cards and clarify any queries briefly. Give them five minutes to come up with two sentences.

Activity

The picture cards are of:

1. **Aiden** – a white boy with Down's syndrome.
2. **Khalid** – a boy of Asian heritage, who is a wheelchair user.
3. **Aisha** – a teenage girl wearing a hijab.
4. **Taylor** – a teenager in a 'hoodie'.
5. **Katy** – a young white girl.
6. **Charlie** – a young boy of Chinese heritage, who is overweight.
7. **Dennis** – a young boy of Middle-Eastern heritage.
8. **Tanya** – a sullen-looking teenage girl.
9. **Ben** – a gay teenager.
10. **Rosie** – a white teenage 'punk'.

On each card are the following tasks:

1. Imagine that (name of child) is part of a crowd in a shopping centre. In two sentences, say what assumptions might be made about him/her by other people there.
2. Say what you think a foster carer who has been asked to look after (name of child) needs to know about them before he/she arrives. Think about the specific needs that that child may have.

trainer's tip

Some participants may feel uncomfortable about giving responses to Task 1, in case they are seen as prejudiced. You should make clear to the group that they will not be judged on the answers they provide, and that the question is worded to allow for them to talk about the assumptions that others, not they, may make.

Assumptions may be positive or negative. For example, a black teenager may be seen to be threatening by some, but others may assume that all black people are good dancers.

3. After ten minutes, take feedback about the sentences of each group. Here is an example of feedback (on Khalid) in answer to task 1:

Khalid

People may assume that as Khalid is in a wheelchair he is unable to do much for himself and would need full-time care. They may also assume he has learning disabilities. In some parts of the UK, Khalid's ethnic heritage may make him stand out, while elsewhere this would not be the case.

4. Keep feedback brief. You may find that a discussion breaks out amongst the group, but try to keep participants focused and make the key points below.

points to cover

Task 1

Everyone stereotypes people or is stereotyped by others from time to time. This is not always a bad thing because stereotypes can help people decide how to behave in some circumstances.

Each of the children on the cards is an individual. But it's possible to assume something about them from no more than their picture, name and age. The question is, how accurate are these guesses, and if wrong, what harm do they do?

Most of the assumptions people might make do not take account of the fact that the child is fostered. Once this is known, for example, to neighbours or at school, other assumptions might be made that could be hurtful or embarrassing.

Foster carers need to know some reliable information in order to look after each child well. And they need to be alert to the consequences of assumptions made about a child that can damage self-esteem.

Task 2

Information about a child's background is necessary in order to:

- know how to help children settle in during a stressful time
- look after the children safely, having regard to what may have happened to them in the past
- help children deal with the challenges they are facing, including the way the effects of trauma are showing up in their behaviour
- deal with medical and educational needs
- help children to be proud of who they are and encourage them to remain in touch with their heritage
- be aware of negative experiences in their history so that they can help the child to deal with these.

Foster carers need full and complete information about each child, as soon as it is available. Unless it is an emergency, much of the information should ideally be given to the foster family before the child arrives. From the point of view of foster carers, this will help them to think about whether they are likely to be the appropriate family to help the child in question.

points to cover

The placement agreement contains some of this information, and the child's care plan will help further. But foster carers need to be aware of the importance of getting as many details as possible when they receive the first phone call about a possible placement; at this stage they need to know all they can about children's day-to-day care, and anything that will help them feel that their needs and background are being taken care of. They need to feel confident in asking for more information if they need it.

5. Explain that you are going to develop some of the ideas that the small groups have just touched on in the rest of the session.

activity 2.5

Doesn't everyone have an equal chance in life?

40 mins

Why this activity?

- To illustrate that someone's opportunities may be affected by unfair discrimination based on family background, racism, sexism, disability or sexuality.
- To introduce these issues at an early stage so that awareness of them and how they are relevant to foster care can underpin all the sessions.

There are two ways of running this activity, **Option A** and **Option B**. Option A requires a larger space.

What you will need**Option A**

- A room big enough for the whole group to line up against the wall and move across the room without obstacles. For the activity to work best with a group of about 15 people you need a room about 8 metres (25 feet) wide.
- Copies of the **Role cards** with the different outline 'portraits' of children and young people on them. If your group is less than 16 use the number required, chosen in number order. So, for example, if you have 12 in the group use cards 1-12; if eight, use cards 1-8, and so on. It also helps to have the 17 questions written out on large pieces of card so they can be on display as you read them out.

Before you start, check that everyone in the group is physically able to take a full part in the activity.

Option B

- Seventeen 'tokens' (paper clips, coins or large counters) for each group member. It is important to make sure you have enough tokens to enable everyone to take one for each question even though it is unlikely that they will all be used. It is also important that all tokens are identical sizes (all 1p coins or same size paper clips or counters).
- Copies of the **Role cards** with the different outline 'portraits' of children and young people on them. If your group is less than 16 use the number required, chosen in number order. So, for example if you have 12 in the group use cards 1-12; if eight, cards 1-8, and so on. It also helps to have the 17 questions written out on large pieces of card so they can be on display as you read them out.

What to do

1. Give each person one of the **Role cards** and explain that they will each be taking the part of a different 16-year-old. Make sure that you are using the number of cards matching the number of people in the group, numbered in order.

Role cards

1. Female. White/Northern Irish. Disabled. A wheelchair user. Living in a residential home.
2. Male. White/Scottish. Able-bodied. Has wealthy parents.
3. Female. Indian. Has Down's Syndrome. Living with foster carers.
4. Female. Chinese. Able-bodied. Parents have a low income.
5. Female. White/Welsh. Able-bodied. Heterosexual.
6. Male. Mixed heritage – white English/African Caribbean. Able-bodied. Living in a children's home.
7. Female. White/English. Able-bodied. A lesbian.
8. Male. White/Welsh. Able-bodied. Living with foster carers.
9. Male. Pakistani. Able-bodied. Heterosexual.
10. Female. Chinese. Able-bodied. Heterosexual.
11. Female. White/English. Able-bodied. Living with foster carers.
12. Male. African Caribbean. Able-bodied. Gay.
13. Male. White/Northern Irish. Able-bodied. Gay.
14. Female. White/Scottish. Able-bodied. Has Down's Syndrome. Living with foster carers.
15. Female. White/English. Able-bodied. Pregnant. Homeless.
16. Male. African. Able-bodied. Has wealthy parents.

2. Clarify what is on each card with each person in case people have difficulty reading or do not understand some of the terms used such as 'heterosexual', 'able-bodied' or 'Down's syndrome'.
3. Tell each group member not to let anyone else know what is on the card.

Questions

There are two options for this activity; in both you will need to ask participants the following questions:

Can you easily:

- Use public transport?
- Expect consistent medical care?
- Kiss your boyfriend or girlfriend in public if you want to?
- Go shopping when you want to?
- Use public toilets?
- Feel safe outside after dark?
- Expect to make a successful career in business or politics?
- Expect to be judged on more than just your looks?
- Expect not to have to look after younger children at home regularly?
- Expect to get good qualifications if you work hard?
- Keep in touch with your immediate family?
- Invite friends home?
- Keep your belongings safe?
- Explain why you are living where you are?
- Stay overnight with your friend?
- Expect others to take your opinions seriously?
- Expect to be safe from abuse tomorrow?

Option A

4. Ask everyone to stand in a line with their backs against the wall. Explain that you are going to ask them a series of questions about the young person on their card. If they answer yes they must move forward a step, if no, they must remain where they are.

Ask everyone to take quite small steps, not large strides.

5. Read out the questions.

trainer's tip

You may find that the activity's similarity to a game makes people laugh at first, but the differences that emerge between the young people pictured on the cards should have a real impact, particularly those who remain near the wall. If your room is not long enough and those out in front reach the wall quickly, you can still continue to ask the questions. People who have reached the wall will be aware that they could have taken additional steps. Being prevented by the wall from doing so may produce empathy with those at the back.

6. When you have asked all the questions, pause briefly and remark on the shape the group has formed, with some people remaining at the back near the wall, others out in front further down the room. Ask people to remain in position.
7. Take feedback by asking group members to stay where they are and one by one to read out what is on their card. Work from the front to the back. At this point, the physical distance between the members should illustrate the different opportunities available to them.
8. To ensure that some of the learning points are made, ask:
 - How did it feel to be out in front?
 - How was it at the back and not moving?

Invite everyone to return to their chairs.

Option B

4. Place a pile of tokens in the centre of the table. Explain that you are going to ask them a series of questions in their role. If they answer 'Yes' to the question they must pick up a token.
5. Read out the questions.
6. When you have asked all the questions, pause briefly and remark on the fact that some people have many tokens while some have few or none.
7. Take feedback by asking each person to read out what is on their card, one by one. Begin with those with the most tokens, and work down to people with the least. The size of the different piles should illustrate the different opportunities available to them.

8. To ensure that some of the learning points are made, ask:
- How did it feel to collect a large pile of tokens?
 - What was it like to acquire only a few or none?

trainer's tip

This activity usually ends up with those holding cards 1, 3, and 6 at the back of the room or with fewest tokens. The person with card 2 ends up clearly in front, followed by 5 and 16. Where roles are similar, those who are young women are behind the young men, and black people behind those who are white. The positions will vary to some extent with every group because they will reflect individual levels of awareness.

Both options

9. Open up a wider discussion. First ensure that people understand that they are members of the group again and no longer being the young person on their card. To reinforce this go quickly round the room asking people to say their real first name.
10. If some people have ended up in a position or with a number of tokens that is very different from what you would expect (for example by underestimating the impact of unfair discrimination against disabled people or black people) invite people in the group to comment on how the young people described on that card ended up.
11. If people disagree strongly, try to keep the focus on the position of the young person described on the card rather than letting a group member feel criticised.

points to cover

Stress that the activity is not about labelling people, but about acknowledging that in reality opportunities are affected because society tends to treat people not as individuals, but rather as members of different groups, some of which are valued more than others.

Note that people will have made assumptions about the young person on their card, because not all information was provided. For example, some cards specifically mentioned young people who were gay, lesbian or heterosexual. Others did not have this information.

points to cover

What did people assume? Is it likely that they assumed that they were heterosexual? Foster carers cannot just make these assumptions about young people they look after.

Black and ethnic minority people, women or disabled people are still under-represented in senior positions in powerful organisations. Able-bodied men who are white continue to have an advantage. Some groups experience religious discrimination.

Being in care affects many ordinary aspects of life such as education, health and keeping in touch with friends. This will affect the opportunities open to individuals.