



chapter

4

understanding children in foster care

Introduction

A child's behaviour is usually determined by their developmental stage. As children grow, they explore and learn more about the world around them. This enables them to develop their skills and understanding and helps them to build their abilities and life skills as they approach adulthood. At certain stages in the process, many children or young people will demonstrate similar behaviours – for example, many primary school children have a 'best' friend who is their preferred playmate, while many teenagers question the opinions of the adults around them as they form their own values about the world.

Sometimes however, development and behaviour do not follow the 'usual' course, due to difficult experiences the child has had. In this chapter, we will look at how past experiences can affect children, particularly those who are fostered, and at how this knowledge can help foster carers understand and deal with children's behaviour in a way that promotes security and resilience.

By the end of this section you will have an understanding of:

- child development and basic attachment theory
- how to deal with challenging behaviour in a positive way
- how foster carers can help encourage resilience and self-esteem.

Secure attachment

If the person (or people) caring for the child is available and responds sensitively to their needs, the child can relax, enjoy and explore the world. The child does not need to worry about where food and cuddles are coming from. The carer is providing a *secure base* for them.

The carer or parent does not need to be perfect for the child to learn trust and feel secure, they just need to be 'good enough'.

Secure attachments are the foundation for healthy physical and emotional development, as well as the ability to learn. A secure attachment can enable a child to:

- Attain his or her full intellectual potential.
- Sort out what he or she perceives.
- Think logically.
- Develop social emotions.
- Trust others.
- Become self-reliant.
- Cope better with stress and frustration.
- Reduce feelings of jealousy.
- Overcome common fears and worries.
- Increase feelings of self-worth.

A child who has had the opportunity to become securely attached to one or more people can go on to develop attachments to new care-givers. This is the case whether the child is a baby, a toddler, an older child or a teenager. This is crucial to foster care because it means that a child has the potential to develop attachments to foster carers at any age.

Insecure attachment

Care that is not 'good enough', or is neglectful or abusive, leaves children feeling highly anxious. Physical and emotional neglect or abuse in early childhood can affect both a child's physical and psychological health.

In these circumstances, children are likely to form strong, but insecure, attachments to their parents or care-givers. Children are often very loyal to their parents, even if they have harmed them. After all, these are the only parents that they know. Children also often feel very protective of parents who may have mental health problems or are victims of domestic violence. They will often have mixed feelings of anger and sadness, fear and concern.

These experiences affect the way they perceive themselves and others. Children create a 'internal working model' of the world as a result of their experiences. Past experiences may have 'taught' a child in foster care to think the following:

- I have no control over my life.
- Adults are not reliable/adults do not protect children.
- I can't count on anyone or anything.
- Everything is my fault.
- I don't deserve to have good things happen to me.
- I'm different, I'm damaged, I'm a failure.
- I'm unlovable.
- No one wants me.

In some cases 'attachment disorders', found in those who have never had the chance to build a secure attachment or those who have had attachments continually broken, may result in disturbed behaviour. Therapeutic support may be necessary to help these children and young people overcome their difficulties and build successful relationships with others.

Separation and loss

Separation, such as when children go into foster care, will provoke anxiety in both securely and insecurely attached children. Children who have experienced many moves in their lives will be even more affected. The lack of continuity and consistency in their care could leave them not knowing what to expect from the world.

Children often worry about their parent(s) and fear that they don't love them or will forget them. Even when babies and children have been neglected or frightened, they miss their familiar environments and the people they have looked to for care.

Some children are also relieved. They may miss their parents or brothers and sisters, but if they have been hurt or rejected they may be relieved that they are now safe.

These can be a confusing mix of feelings to deal with. Children may be grieving for the loss of their own family while feeling anxious about their new life with a foster family. This grief and anxiety may be expressed as anger, as well as sadness.

Behaviour of insecurely attached children

Insecurely attached children whose parents have not been emotionally available for them, or helped them to feel cared for and safe (and may have rejected or frightened them), may well be anxious and lack trust. But they have had to find ways to cope with these feelings and fears.

Children who have insecure attachments in the birth family often cope by:

- Shutting down on their feelings and being self-reliant.
- Demanding their parents' attention all the time.
- Trying to control their parents – for example, by being aggressive.

Even in the first year of life babies learn how to cope and survive. Small babies of three to four months old may already have learned to stop showing their feelings if their parents get angry when they cry.

Children of all ages bring these coping behaviours into the foster home – eg a baby might be reluctant to be held. Older children may shut down on their feelings and say 'I'm OK', be very demanding or try to control the situation by being defiant. There are many ways in which they try to manage their anxiety and lack of trust.

It is important for foster carers to understand that they have not caused these behaviours – this is the way the child has learned to cope and survive in the past when they felt anxious. It will take time for foster carers to help a child to trust, to share feelings, to be less demanding and to let the foster carer care for them.

What can foster carers do?

Children going into foster care will have differing experiences of attachment relationships. The effect of these differences may lead some young people to long for, and demand, a close relationship with their foster carers, while others may need more space and distance.

For this reason, foster carers will need to 'pace' their relationship sensitively so that fostered children move forward at their own speed, as they feel comfortable.

By providing structures and routines which symbolise order, predictability and reliability, foster carers provide the secure base from which children can sustain existing attachments and/ or develop new attachments.

The long-term plan for a fostered child may be to move to adopters, foster carers who are able to offer permanence, or to return to their family. In all but the briefest placements, foster carers looking after the child in the meantime will offer him or her an experience of attachment and all the benefits that come with it.

For foster carers, it can be demanding to make the emotional investment required for a child to benefit from attachment to them, for them to become attached to a child and then to 'let go' when the time comes. We will look at this in Chapter 6.

Activity 4.5

Find out about the training and support that your fostering service offers to help you understand attachment in more depth. Make any notes here.

7.3b

Providing a secure base ¹

There are five important aspects of care-giving that combine and interact to provide a secure base for children, which promotes security and resilience:

1. Availability – helps children to trust

- Availability means showing children and young people that they will be safe and their needs will be met.
- It includes showing and telling children and young people that reliable adults are 'there for them', both physically and emotionally.
- This helps children to trust in adults and believe in themselves.

2. Sensitivity – helps children to manage feelings and behaviour

- Sensitivity means trying to 'tune in' to children and young people in order to understand what they might be thinking and feeling.
- It includes helping children to 'name' their feelings, think about their feelings and behaviour and understand that other people also have thoughts and feelings.
- This helps children and young people to manage their feelings and behaviour more positively.

¹ *Attachment Handbook for Foster Care and Adoption*, Schofield, G and Beek, M, London: BAAF (2006)

3. Acceptance - helps to build self-esteem

- Acceptance means accepting children and young people for who they are, including their strengths and their difficulties.
- It includes promoting strengths, interests and activities, while at the same time, helping them to accept that they cannot be good at everything.
- This helps children to feel good about themselves and builds their self-esteem.

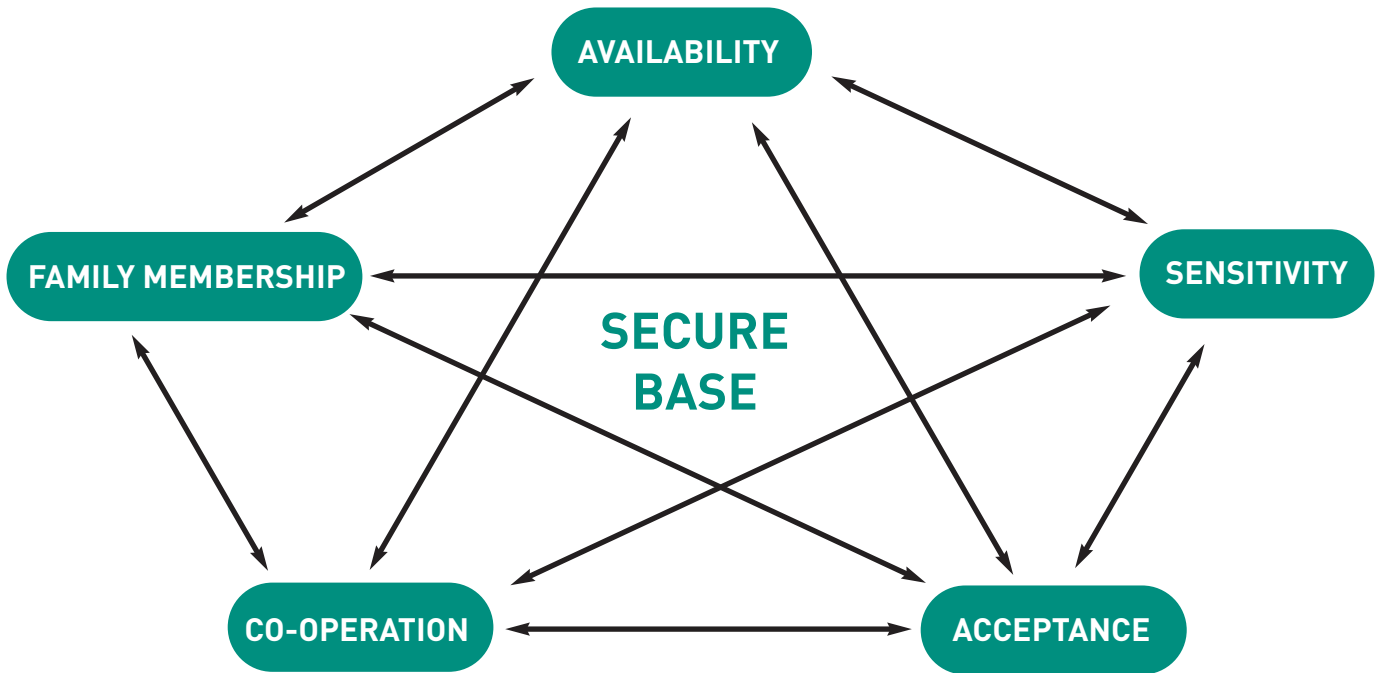
4. Co-operation – helps children to feel effective and be co-operative

- Co-operation means working alongside children and young people and respecting them as separate individuals who have thoughts, feelings and intentions of their own.
- It includes setting firm boundaries but within these offering choice, negotiation and compromise.
- This, in turn, helps the children to compromise and co-operate.

5. Family membership – helps children to feel that they belong

- This means promoting a comfortable sense of membership of both the foster family and the birth family.
- The balance between the two families will vary, depending on the individual child or young person and the type and length of the placement.
- This helps children and young people to feel that they can belong to both families at a level that is comfortable and beneficial to them.

The secure base star



All of the above elements of caregiving combine and interact to form a 'secure base' for children and young people. For example, if a child feels accepted and has high self-esteem he or she is more likely to feel effective and be co-operative.

When children and young people begin to trust in a secure base, they will be better able to learn and develop.

The first step in providing a secure base is to think about the child or young person's earlier experiences and how these might be affecting them now. This will help you to focus on what the child/young person needs and what sort of caregiving approaches are likely to help them.

This process will take time and it is often helpful for foster carers to think in terms of 'small steps' of progress – perhaps focusing on just one or two areas at a time. If a child is with you for only a short period of time you are unlikely to be able to change their perceptions and behaviour entirely, but you may be able to make small changes that will help them build trust in others.

To show how each dimension of the 'star' model can be useful in a range of ways, we will look at one in more detail.

Sensitivity – helping children to express and manage feelings

An important part of dealing with behaviour is helping children to find other ways to express their feelings. Foster carers should not deny children's feelings or tell them to 'cheer up', they should work with children to help them identify and communicate their feelings. There are many techniques foster carers can use to achieve this, including:

Naming feelings

By giving names to their own feelings foster carers can help children to recognise and communicate them, and to demonstrate that feelings are both real and understandable. This begins in infancy during everyday caring routines, but can also be applied through childhood and adolescence.

Using stories and toys

Stories and toys are a natural way to communicate with children. They are 'one step removed' from the child so can be used to reflect feelings in a less direct or pressurised way. They can demonstrate that other people have feelings and help children to think about other ways of dealing with feelings. Stories in which characters learn to manage, resolve and move on from their feelings can offer hope and a positive way forward for children.

Mirroring and containing feelings

When children are distressed, their care-giver will often reflect some of that distress by facial expression, tone of voice and so on, but then offer a soothing remark with a normal tone of voice and a reassuring facial expression. This process of mirroring and containing strong feelings shows that they can be coped with and made safe.

Pause for thought

During this process of 'mirroring and containing' children can benefit from a space (in infants this may only be a few seconds, in adolescents it may be several hours) in which to reflect. This pause for thought enables them to think about other people's feelings and what the options might be to resolve the situation. However, foster carers must be careful if using 'time-out' methods to control behaviour as these may cause panic in an insecurely attached child.

Staying available

When children are upset and angry they can panic further if they are separated from a care-giver. Foster carers should make clear that they are close by and 'available' to children; even when children are misbehaving, the carers must be providing a secure base.

Acknowledging mixed feelings

In order to help children to understand and respond to their full range of feelings, foster carers should acknowledge that it is possible, and normal, to have mixed feelings about something – one can feel angry, yet still love someone, for example.

Modelling the expression of own feelings

A key role for care-givers is to demonstrate to the child the safe expression of their own feelings. For example, a disagreement between a couple might be followed by a brief explanation that it is normal to feel cross with each other at times, but that this does not change the underlying relationship. This demonstrates to the child that strong feelings do not have to spiral out of control, that we can love people and feel cross with them at the same time and that minor rifts in relationships are normal and can be repaired.

Co-operation

Sensitive parents and foster carers view children as separate individuals who have free-will, thoughts, feelings and intentions of their own. They avoid situations in which they interfere abruptly or impose their will upon the child's.

Foster carers should aim for a 'co-operative alliance', which helps the child to feel part of a decision-making process. This gives them control over their world and an understanding of compromise.

Resilience

A child's development is rather like a sailing boat that makes good progress in fine weather. But it can be blown off course by adverse conditions, or be severely damaged. It may veer off course and never recover – or it may reach calmer waters.

Whatever has gone wrong in the lives of young people in the past, they need help to overcome the adversity they have experienced in order to develop as successful adults.

Some of what is necessary for this comes from the strengths that young people have inside themselves: humour, intelligence, persistence, courage, insight about their problems, loyalty and the ability to understand the actions of others.

These characteristics, in combinations unique to each young person, can work together to counteract the effects of rejection, trauma and abuse as well as influence their own behaviour. They contribute to the quality of resilience that enables so many children to survive adverse circumstances.

Ways in which foster carers can work with children and young people to build resilience:

- Help them to feel they have a say in their lives, empower them to put their point of view across and encourage them to expect to have a say.
- Offer praise and encouragement for achievements, however small.
- Use communication skills to listen to children and young people and address their fears.
- Provide them with the information they want and need, including about why they are in foster care and what is going to happen next.
- Encourage children to develop a caring attitude towards others. The foster carer can provide a 'model' for this sort of behaviour, making sure that the young person knows that you believe that they have it in them to be a 'good' person.
- Encourage contact with family members and other key people from the young person's past. This will help build a sense of identity and heritage, as discussed in Chapter 2.
- Encourage friendships with other people their own age.
- Encourage interests and involvements that provide a sense of self-assurance and satisfaction. These could include music, sport, cultural pursuits and hobbies.
- Encourage them to attend school, not just for their education and future opportunities, but for the social development it offers.

Case study: Darcey

Darcey is seven. Her mother, Anya, is a heroin addict and during the early years of her life Darcey moved around with Anya, staying at her friends' flats and sometimes in hostels. During this time she was often left alone for long periods, and may have been physically abused by friends of her mother's.

Darcey went into foster care two years ago, and has been placed with Serena after her first placement broke down. She had contact with her mother for a short time, but Anya stopped

turning up for these meetings and now no one knows where she is.

Serena is concerned as Darcey is withdrawn and won't express her feelings about anything, from what she would like to have for dinner to how she feels about no longer seeing her mother. Recently, she has started wetting the bed.

Activity 4.8

What might Darcey have learnt about the world from her past experiences?

How might this be affecting her behaviour and development?