

contact



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the fostering network
the voice of foster care



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Introduction

Research has generally endorsed that for most children structured contact with their parents positively influences their social and emotional development and leads to placement continuity.

Berridge (1996)

Some initial observations about contact from foster carers

A group of foster carers had gathered in a pleasant training room for a workshop on contact – how they could support children’s relationships with their family and friends through meetings and other types of communication. Lunch was being provided, the chairs were comfortable and the equipment worked. So far, so good.

Many of the carers were very experienced and had worked with large numbers of children and young people over many years. Some may have had sneaking doubts about how much more they could learn in this area. Others were very new with, in some cases, only a few months of fostering under their belts. The trainer needed to find a way into the topic of contact in a way that recognised the range of experience in the room. Where to start?

She asked the following question, and the answers form the starting point for this book:

What do you know about contact now, that you wish you had known or understood at the beginning of your fostering career?

There was an intake of breath followed by a long silence as each person present tried to reconnect with what they had expected when starting out as foster carers, the images and the assumptions about fostering and their own role within it. These are some of their comments:

I just did not realise that fostering is so much about contact. I saw it as sort of separate, like an ‘add on’ to the main task of looking after the child.

It’s just so huge. The preparation training was good, but I hadn’t bargained for the impact of supporting the child and managing my own feelings about some of the parents.

The social workers all said that the plans and decisions were based on the young person’s best interests. It all seemed obvious, but no one said how many different views of the child’s ‘best interests’ there could be.

The members of the group began to examine what had happened since their initial approval and to think about the children and the families they had worked with. They talked about how different the reality was to how many of them had imagined the work of fostering. Some said they were under-prepared for the issues raised by contact when they were approved. Others said that their preparation period had to cover such a huge range of new issues it was just not possible to give in-depth attention to everything.

A few carers said that they would not have been ready to hear more at that early point anyway. They had been confident – then – that they knew and understood the issues. One person had the courage to say he had enjoyed the preparation training, but felt it all focused on the problems – he thought the social workers were just trying to put them off.

As people started to relax, they began to acknowledge that contact had raised personal and emotional issues for them that were often quite hard to talk about. While everyone believed they were committed to listening to children and young people and supporting contact, further discussion revealed just how difficult this could sometimes be.

Another thing the group agreed about was that foster carers have the most difficult job of all in relation to contact. While social workers, residential workers or staff at the local family centre are all involved in contact too, foster carers are in a unique position. They are working with parents, relatives and social workers, and they are the only ones who are actually living with the children.

The carers described how living with the children had enormous implications for their sense of personal responsibility and their level of investment in what happened to the children. The physical closeness and living together under one roof meant that fostering affected the emotions and wellbeing of the entire foster family, as well as the child. When things went well, the whole family could celebrate. When things went wrong, the whole family felt it.

They also spoke about the emotions they often experienced when preparing for, managing, and, sometimes, supervising their fostered children's contact arrangements. There was a sense of pleasure and pride when they felt they were effective, confident and helpful to the children and their families. This was, after all, what they went into fostering to do.

But they also described a wide range of other more difficult emotions – sadness, anger and frustration – which they sometimes experienced in relation to contact. These feelings involved considerable stress. Stress could get in the way of their ability to think clearly about the problems they were encountering. It could affect their ability to communicate in a reflective, measured way with social workers.

These hard-to-manage emotions tended to happen when there was a difference of view about the arrangements for contact. They often happened when tensions arose between those responsible for planning for a child. It was a source of concern to the carers that it was when the quality or the frequency of contact posed the most concerns – when everyone seemed to be coming from a different place – that relationships between the parties could be most strained.

This was an important place to have reached in the training. The members of the group had faced some tough questions:

- Why is it that while you believe fostered children should have contact with their families, you can still struggle and feel upset when it actually happens?
- How is it possible to listen to children, interpret their behaviour and deal constructively with parents when your own emotions are running high?
- Aren't there times when the contact appears to keep children looking backwards to their pasts and not forward to their futures?

- How and (sometimes) why do you continue to work with parents who consistently do not put their children first?
- How do you keep relationships productive and focused on the child when people do not all see the issues of contact in the same way?
- How can foster carers support children's relationships with their family and friends so that they achieve the very best outcome for each child in their care?

These, everyone agreed, were challenges for most foster carers at some point in their fostering careers – whether they were newly approved and encountering their first placements or already had a long career behind them. Fortunately, the experienced carers were able to offer something else to the group. In addition to the problems and dilemmas that are part and parcel of contact, and which will take such a central role in this book, they were able to say that contact can also be uplifting and enjoyable for children and young people. One of their most important messages was that foster carers can really make a difference to children's lives.

Appendix 3: The Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care

Contact provides a solid foundation for considering the issues of contact in relation to the Children's Workforce Development Council's seven standards (England, 2007).

<p>Standard 1 Understand the principles and values essential for fostering children and young people</p>	<p>Introduction of the key principles and values in relation to children's and families' rights to contact and the respect, openness and fairness which characterise the key values for work in this area.</p>
<p>Standard 2 Understand your role as a foster carer</p>	<p>Examines the foster carer's role in promoting and supporting contact and the implications of carers providing this service as part of the corporate parenting responsibilities of councils and boards.</p>
<p>Standard 3 Understand health and safety and health care</p>	<p>Discusses children's mental health needs and the foster carer's responsibilities for considering children's physical and mental health in contact.</p>
<p>Standard 4 Know how to communicate effectively</p>	<p>Provides advice and support for the range of communication tasks with children, their families and children's services.</p>
<p>Standard 5 Understand the development of children and young people</p>	<p>Relates attachment and developmental theory to the understanding of children's needs for contact and the tasks around assessment and the preparation of children for contact.</p>
<p>Standard 6 Keep children safe from harm</p>	<p>Considers the balance of risk and safety in contact and the responsibilities of foster carers to be alert to the safety of fostered children and their own children during contact.</p>
<p>Standard 7 Develop yourself</p>	<p>At all points, seeks to encourage and reinforce reflective learning, reference to literature and research, and the value of training and support.</p>