

behaviour



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Jane was the director of the Fostering Network Wales from 2002 until 2007 and continues her interest in foster care as the chair of a local authority fostering panel in Wales.

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Jane Butler

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Contents

	<i>foreword</i>	6
	<i>introduction</i>	7
SECTION 1	<i>introduction</i>	11
chapter 1	<i>learning behaviour through experience</i>	13
chapter 2	<i>what's going on inside?</i>	25
chapter 3	<i>you and your family</i>	37
chapter 4	<i>part of a team</i>	45
SECTION 2	<i>introduction</i>	55
chapter 5	<i>from birth to four years old</i>	57
chapter 6	<i>from five to 11 years old</i>	71
chapter 7	<i>from 12 to 18 years old</i>	85
	<i>understanding behaviour: some real-life stories</i>	97
	<i>conclusion</i>	99
appendix 1	<i>further resources</i>	102
appendix 2	<i>references</i>	103
appendix 3	<i>the training, support and development standards for foster care</i>	104

Foreword

The Fostering Network has campaigned for many years now for foster carers to have access to a professional development framework that is in line with other occupations in the child care workforce. Foster carers choose to take a child or young person in need of support into their home, and the complex and demanding role they undertake makes them valuable members of the child care workforce.

Foster carers need, and deserve, high quality training and resources throughout their fostering careers. This will help them achieve the best possible outcomes for the children and young people they foster.

I am therefore delighted to introduce our *Pathways Through Fostering* publications and training courses. These offer professional, tailored, post-approval guidance for foster carers in key topics. Each topic is covered both in a publication and a training course, each with a clear focus on the specific challenges faced by foster carers.

There is an increasing movement towards implementing training and development standards for foster carers across the UK, and you will find that the *Pathways Through Fostering* materials can be linked to standards, qualifications and legislation in each of the four nations.

We recommend that every foster carer has access to the *Pathways Through Fostering* programme as part of their post-approval professional development plan.

Robert Tapsfield
Chief Executive
The Fostering Network

Introduction

This is a book about the behaviour of children in foster care – how we can understand behaviours that puzzle us, cope with behaviours that challenge us and help children to learn positive behaviours.

Fostering involves the huge responsibility of looking after someone else's child, often part of the way through their childhood, sometimes into adulthood and beyond. The role of foster carers can be challenging, varied and fulfilling. There is the myriad of practical tasks – everything from changing nappies, cooking meals, keeping a clean and comfortable home, cleaning out hamster cages, acting as a taxi driver to helping disentangle that tricky maths homework problem. As a foster carer, you are doing everything that parents should do for their own children – and more.

You are also helping children to cope with being part of two families (and helping your own family adapt to the changes brought by a new family member). You are usually helping a fostered child to maintain contact with their own family while making them feel a part of your family for as long as they might be there. You are helping them to understand why they are in foster care and not living at home.

Then there are the activities that you need to do as part of your professional role as a foster carer – attending meetings with social workers and support workers, contributing to reviews, taking part in training, belonging to support groups, keeping in touch with parents and helping with contact arrangements. Appointments at medicals, therapy sessions and school may all play a part and there are records to write about the children you look after.

Alongside this complex and busy activity, you are dealing with behaviours that you may find challenging. A fostered toddler may be having tantrums, her eight-year-old brother wetting the bed and your own teenage daughter may have a boyfriend you don't like very much and be coming in too late in the evenings.

The reason for fostering

When faced with all of this, it can be difficult to remember the bigger picture of what you are trying to achieve for the children you look after. Foster carers aim to give children, often children with troubled backgrounds, every opportunity to become successful adults. It can be difficult to describe the 'success' we hope for, but we know it when we see it.

We want children to become adults who feel secure about who they are, who have come to terms with their past, have satisfying things to do during the day and a supportive social network. We want them to be able to deal with the usual challenges and difficulties that everyone faces in life. We want children to become secure, resilient adults.

Helping a child to become such an adult involves much more than the practical tasks of daily life. It involves emotional engagement and an active commitment to that child's development and wellbeing.

It involves teaching them what life is about, showing them that adults can be trustworthy and helping them to learn how to get along with other people. It involves worry, uncertainty, sleepless nights and pleasure and pride in their achievements – whether it is seeing them share a new toy with a friend, attending school after refusing to go for weeks or giving you a hug for the first time.

As foster carers you need to respond to a huge variety of different behaviours from children at different ages. Some of these behaviours will cause deep concern and uncertainty as you struggle with the best way of helping children change and develop positively. You may look after babies who just never seem to stop crying, toddlers who should be full of life but are actually quiet and withdrawn, young children who bite and pinch, older ones who fall in and out of friendships every day, or teenagers who feel that they are useless and that life is not worth living.

A child's own parents have a lot of information about their children. They know their history, how they have got on at school and who their friends are. They have learned that if their son hangs around in the kitchen, it probably means there is something he wants to talk about but doesn't know where to start. They know how best to handle their daughter when she is having a 'stubborn' day. Yet with all these advantages, even good, caring parents often struggle to know how to deal with their children's behaviour. They can feel overwhelmed by conflicting advice from friends, family and the media.

As a foster carer you have all the challenges of parenting and more besides. You may have very limited information about the children and young people you look after. You may be uncertain about how long a child will be living in your family. You may come from a very different culture and background from the child or young person you foster and not know much about how they have been looked after in the past. Some children you look after will have had several parental figures in their lives, perhaps having known two or three different 'dads' at home and several foster placements. This adds to the challenges of understanding and responding to their behaviour.

About this book

This book won't provide any quick or easy answers. But it will help you to think about how children learn their behaviour, what their behaviour might mean and how we can help them to develop and change.

We will give you some tools to try out such as sticker charts, helping children to start to think differently about the world or using 'time out' in a sensitive way.

But, more importantly, you will be encouraged to think about how essential it is to build a good relationship with each child you look after and try to work out what their behaviour might mean.

This book will also ask you to think about yourself and develop yourself as a foster carer. Sometimes, to understand what is going on for children, we also have to understand ourselves and our reactions. To help children change we may have to try a different approach – we may have to make some changes ourselves.

It is sometimes easy to focus on the difficulties of children in foster care and think about those who are the most damaged and the most challenging, such as young people who are excluded from school, aggressive at home or who behave in bizarre ways that make us uncomfortable.

But it is so important to remember that the majority of children do very well in foster care. They are not excluded from school, or violent, or especially difficult. They cope remarkably well with the problems that have brought them into foster care, adapt to their new families and become loved and loving members of the family.

Not only that, but there are many stories of children and young people who make significant progress in foster care and thrive on the opportunities they are given to learn and change. Sometimes these changes are dramatic, sometimes they are small steps. We do need to be realistic about what is possible for an individual child at a particular time but we also need to be optimistic and believe that we can help them change.

In Chapters 1 and 2 we will look at some key concepts to give us a framework for understanding children's behaviour and how you, as foster carers, can use this understanding to help them change.

Many of you will be fostering as a couple or as a family: Chapter 3 discusses the effect of fostering on sons and daughters and the importance of making sure that your family and the children and young people you foster are a good match.

In Chapter 4, we will look at other people involved with children in foster care and think about how you can work together in this wider team.

These chapters make up the first section of the book.

The second section takes a look at different developmental stages, some common challenges at each stage and some ideas for foster carers wanting to help children and young people with particular difficulties. You will also find pointers towards more information and resources.

Chapter 5 looks at the early years, from babyhood until a child starts school.

Chapter 6 explores the primary school years.

Chapter 7 thinks about young people in their pre-teens and teenagers.

The book ends with the stories of some children and young people who were helped by their foster carers to move from troubled and troubling behaviours to become confident adults, able to make sense of their past and with positive futures ahead of them.