

education



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the fostering network
the voice of foster care



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Introduction

This book is about helping fostered children and young people to succeed. Education can change lives. It can open the door to new dreams and expectations for adult life. It can enrich relationships, develop self-confidence and deepen self-identity.

Foster care too can change lives. It can provide a strong foundation for life, improve self-esteem and give a positive self-image. It can make the difference between a life of insecurity and a life with fulfilling relationships.

Just imagine the potential for transforming young lives when you bring educational success and high quality foster care together.

Today, a small number of fostered young people are seeing their lives transformed by this combination of educational success and high quality foster care – and they are achieving their dreams.

In the next few years, there is every possibility that this number will increase. You, as a foster carer, will be one of the most important keys for unlocking this potential of fostered children and young people. The government-funded *Fostering Achievement* programme in Northern Ireland talks about equipping foster carers to be 'first educators' for fostered children and young people. 'First educator' is a term used in education for a parent or carer who knows enough to meet a child or young person's immediate educational needs, and knows when and how to access education services and qualified education workers. In this respect, their role is similar to a 'first aider' who can meet immediate needs and knows how and when to call in the medics. The aim of this *Pathways Through Fostering* publication is to help you become a confident 'first educator'.

The thought of fostered children and young people succeeding in education and life may seem unrealistic. Most books and research on education and foster care focus on the majority of fostered children and young people who are not achieving their dreams, or who are so disillusioned that they have stopped dreaming. It can be discouraging to hear the constant repetition of damning statistics that show the size of the gap between the educational achievements of fostered children and young people and those of their contemporaries. Even foster carers can start to lose heart and have low expectations of the children and young people they foster. By learning to be a 'first educator', you can be part of changing those statistics.

You may have some doubts about whether education is part of your role. Surely foster care is all about social care and the social and emotional needs of children and young people who cannot live with their parents. Isn't education the school's responsibility?

If you are asking yourself questions like this, you are not alone. In the past, the foster care system, and many foster carers, focused on the part of a child or young person's life that related to why they needed foster care. Other parts of a child or young person's life were often overlooked.

For foster care to succeed, though, foster care cannot be a social care service. Foster care is a service to children and young people. This means a service concerned about the whole of their lives, not just keeping them safe and meeting their social care needs. As a foster carer, you provide the hands-on care and support that these children and young people need.

The idea of being a 'first educator' may feel threatening if your own educational experiences left you feeling inadequate or resentful. You may be among the many foster carers who left school with few or no qualifications, or you may be among those who are postgraduates.

Your own educational experience says little about your ability to promote or support education. Some foster carers with no formal qualifications are passionate, skilled supporters of education and any child or young person who they foster will have the best possible opportunities to succeed educationally.

Some graduate foster carers fail to promote education in their role as foster carer, believing that it's unrealistic to expect fostered children and young people to do well at school. The most they think they can hope for is that the young person will make it to adult life in one piece.

I hated school. I couldn't leave fast enough. My parents didn't care as long as I got some kind of job after school. But I regretted it later. I didn't let my own children make that mistake, and I'm not going to let fostered children waste their years at school.

Foster carer, England

If your own educational experiences and qualifications do not predict how well you promote and support education, what does? You are most likely to have the skills and attitude to promote education if you are currently learning, formally or informally.

There are many opportunities for adult learning, and as a foster carer you will almost certainly be expected to attend training. Sadly, some foster carers complain about having to go to training and talk resentfully about being expected to study or learn. These foster carers are less likely to be able to promote and support a young person with their education. After all, if you keep banging on about the importance of education, but do nothing to educate yourself, why should a fostered young person listen to you?

What is 'success'?

Success has a different meaning for each child or young person you foster. Success means achieving their potential, or enough of their potential to be able to fulfil their dreams. Success does not have to mean five or more GCSEs at A to C. For one young person, success may mean learning to communicate discomfort and pleasure; for another young person, success may mean four A Levels at grade A or B and a place at university. Both of these achievements can be equal examples of educational success. Either could be an under-achievement when compared with what they might have been able to achieve.*

What is 'education'?

Education means many things. This book examines three aspects of education:

- School (and alternatives to school) – the place where compulsory, formal, full-time education takes place between the ages of five and 16, and optional formal education takes place before the age of five and after the age of 16.
- Exams, tests and qualifications – the way educational levels are measured, and often the gateway to future education or work.
- Learning and personal development – the informal learning that starts at birth and, hopefully, continues throughout life. It includes learning skills and facts, and developing the ability to use them.

Why is education important?

School and life

School is one of the most important influences on most children and young people's lives. Their experiences at school affect their sense of identity and self-esteem, which in turn affect their ability to learn and be happy in later life. Perhaps most importantly, school can provide continuity when the rest of life is in turmoil.

School and the rest of life seem to be in a cycle, so that changing one has knock-on effects on the other. So, if school is going well, the rest of life usually improves which means that school goes even better. If home life takes a nose-dive, then school is likely to go downhill as well which in turn means home life becomes less manageable (Jackson, 2007). This has implications for placement stability – improving school is likely to improve placement stability; placement instability is likely to have a negative effect at school.

School is not just about formal education. It also provides social benefits, such as contact with existing friends and a chance to make new friends. For a fostered child or young person placed with foster carers who do not reflect their heritage, school can be a place to find role models and form friendships with people who do reflect their culture.

Most children and young people are in school, so many of the programmes and opportunities for children and young people are targeted at schools. It is easy for children and young people educated outside school to miss out on sports clubs, drama clubs, invitations to visit universities and careers advice.

If school experiences are positive, school can be a gateway to:

- improved self-esteem
- more involvement in society
- more resilience
- less risk-taking behaviour
- lower stress levels
- wider access to social support and supportive relationships.

(Jackson, 2001)

In addition, if school experiences are positive, educational achievements are likely to be greater. A combination of positive experiences and educational achievements build resilience to cope with other parts of life.

Education as a route out of poverty

Education is a route out of social disadvantage (Jackson, 2007). You may have left school in the days when it was possible to get a job with good prospects without passing exams. Today, young people without qualifications will find it much harder, if impossible, to climb the career ladder (Bynner and others, 2002). If they get work, it is more likely to be temporary, part time and low paid. An educational qualification is the best single predictor of future earning power (Bynner and others, 2002).

Unfortunately, staying in education delays the age when the young person can start working full time. For someone who does not expect to do well and who is facing an uncertain future, it can be tempting to leave school and get a job, however low paid, to give some stability in life.

Why is education an issue for fostered children and young people?

Most fostered children and young people's performance at school is below their peers.

In England in the year up to September 2005:

- 36 per cent of looked-after children in year 11 were not entered for any GCSE or equivalent exams (41 per cent in 2004).
- 11 per cent of looked-after pupils in year 11 achieved at least five GCSEs at grades A*-C or the equivalent (up from 9 per cent in 2004), compared with 56 per cent of all year 11 pupils.
- 61 per cent of looked-after children who reached school leaving age stayed in full-time education (up two percentage points from 2004), compared with 75 per cent of all school leavers.

(Department for Education and Skills, Statistical Bulletin, 2006)

In Scotland in the year up to September 2005:

- Approximately 45 per cent of those leaving care achieved at least one SCQF (three percentage points more than in 2003/04).
- 30 per cent of care leavers achieved maths and English at SCQF at level 3 or above, compared with more than 90 per cent of all other children.

(The Scottish Government, 2007)

In Northern Ireland in the year up to March 2006:

- 9 per cent of those leaving care achieved five or more GCSEs (Grades A-C), compared with almost two thirds (64 per cent) of Northern Ireland school leavers.
- More than half (55 per cent) of care leavers had no qualifications whatsoever, compared with only 3 per cent of all school leavers.

(Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2007)

In Wales in the year up to March 2007:

- 8 per cent of those leaving care achieved five or more GCSEs (Grades A*-C).
- 18 per cent of those leaving care achieved no qualifications (compared with 2 per cent of all pupils).

(Data Unit Wales, 2007)

There is much debate about why educational outcomes are so poor. Some people suggest it is because of experiences before coming into the care system; others say that the care system itself is responsible for poor outcomes. It is almost certainly a mixture of both. This is explored further in Chapter 8.

Do we know what works?

Most successful fostered children and young people will name their foster carer as one of the most important factors behind their achievements. Others may name another adult who they feel takes a personal interest in them, such as a teacher, family member or someone they know through out-of-school activities (Mallon, 2007).

You cannot be expected to single-handedly resolve all the barriers to educational achievement, but you may well be the single most important factor in helping your fostered child or young person to succeed.

Education and devolution

Devolution has significantly affected the education systems of the UK. Before devolution, England, Wales and Northern Ireland had roughly comparable education systems, policies and programmes. Scotland has always had its own education system. Since devolution, the education systems, policies, programmes, curricula and initiatives have diverged.

Despite devolution, children and young people across the UK still need the same kind of help to succeed educationally. You are still the person best placed to help them get the most out of the education system, regardless of where you are based in the UK.

When writing this book, we had to decide how much specific information to include about each part of the UK and whether to include time-limited information, such as details of current initiatives and programmes. The decision was made to signpost you to where you can get up-to-date information for where you live, rather than include it here. This book focuses on more general information about how to promote education and support fostered children and young people to succeed.

Meet the families

Throughout this book you will meet a number of foster families. Although these families are not real, their stories are based on the true-life experiences of foster families across the UK.

Andy, 45, and Sonia, 42, have two sons – Peter, aged 7, and David, aged 5. They are approved to take emergency and short-term placements for young people aged 11 to 18. Adam, aged 13, will be staying with them long term. They are in the process of transferring him from his old school to the local secondary school.

Josh, 30, and James, 31, have no children of their own. James is home-based. They are approved for up to two long-term placements. Last month a brother and sister, Jay, five, and Leah, three, were placed with the hope that Josh and James may adopt them in the future. Jay has Down's Syndrome.

Naa, 51, and Edem, 58, were born in Ghana and still have strong family links there. They have lived in Birmingham for the last 30 years. They have two adult children. They are support carers for a family affected by mental ill-health, and regularly foster Sophie, 15, and Dan, 12.

Anne, 38, is single and has no children of her own. She is fostering her nephew and niece, both of whom were physically abused by their father (her brother). Jack is 6 and Rosie is 5.

Nyiel and Athiei are from southern Sudan. They fled to Britain in 1998 and now have refugee status. They still think of Sudan as their home and hope it will be safe to return one day. They have three children, Joy, 9, Elijah, 8, and Amos, 6, who were born in Britain. They are currently fostering a Somali young person, Muktar, who arrived in Britain six months ago, speaking no English. They think he is about 14 years old, so he is in S3 at his Scottish school.

As you read through this book, you will find out more about these families and how the foster carers got to grips with promoting education.

Structure of the book

The belief behind this book is that fostered children and young people can succeed at school, in education and in life. The book is structured around the different ways that you can support them to succeed, and the knowledge you may need along the way.

Chapter 1, *Your Role*

If you are going to support children and young people to succeed, you need to understand:

- The education system, your role in it and how to make it work for your fostered child or young person.
- The corporate parenting system, your role in it and how to make it work for your fostered child or young person.
- How to stand up for your fostered child or young person.
- How your expectations will affect their success.

Chapter 2, *Getting the Most Out of School*

Most fostered children and young people are in school. This is usually the local mainstream school. For some it may be a school for pupils with special educational needs, a boarding school or a pupil referral unit. A few are not registered with a school, although if they are aged five to 16 the education authority must provide them with a full-time education. This chapter covers all settings and includes sections on:

- Getting the most out of primary school.
- Getting the most out of secondary school.
- Working with the school and teachers.
- Choosing a school.
- Transitions and changing school.
- Don't forget your own children!

Chapter 3, *Focus on the Basics*

You can succeed in adult life without a lot of school subjects; but it is very hard to succeed without at least basic:

- Literacy.
- Numeracy.
- Communication skills.
- Problem-solving skills.

This chapter will help you work on these skills with your child or young person.

Chapter 4, *Using Systems to Promote Success*

Some children and young people face particular challenges with school and education. The law provides systems to help them overcome these challenges. The systems can be hard to use the first time, and may require you to use all your advocacy skills on behalf of your fostered child or young person. This chapter looks at the systems for:

- Special educational needs.
- Emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Exclusion.
- Pastoral support and counselling.

Chapter 5, *Exams*

No book on education is complete without information about examinations. This chapter includes:

- Dreaming and planning.
- Choices.
- Coursework.
- Revision.
- Examination day.
- Getting the results.

Chapter 6, *16 and Still Learning*

This chapter looks at how you can help someone succeed as they make the transition to adult life. It includes:

- Staying or leaving? Choices about where and how to live.
- Choosing the right learning post-16.
- Going to university.
- Your changing role.
- Can they catch up later?

Chapter 7, *How to Learn*

This chapter looks at how people learn and what makes a good learner. You may want to start with this chapter, particularly if you have ever struggled to learn. It includes:

- Learning styles.
- Are you V, A or K?

- Mind maps.
- Learning environment.
- Learning in daily life.
- Out of school activities.

Chapter 8, *Links to Learning*

This chapter looks in more depth at how a child or young person's experiences may affect their ability to learn, and how you can help them to overcome these barriers. It looks at:

- Life before foster care.
- Insecurity.
- What affects how fostered children and young people learn.
- Language, culture and ethnic factors.
- Health and disability.

Chapter 9, *Help!*

Foster carers across the UK talk about similar problems with education and helping fostered children and young people to succeed. This chapter uses a question and answer format to tackle some of the common questions and problems.

Conclusion

This is a brief summary of key points for you about your role in helping children and young people to get the most out of education and school.

Appendices

- Checklists.
- Further resources.
- References.
- Links to the CWDC standards (only applicable in England).

Summary

Education is important for the whole of life, in childhood and beyond. Fostered children and young people can, and do, succeed in school. However, as yet, too many are not achieving their educational potential.

You can help children and young people to succeed with their education. Supporting education is part of your role as a foster carer. To do this, you need to understand education and how to get the best out of the education system.

Children and young people who succeed educationally usually have at least one adult who takes a personal interest in them and believes in their ability to overcome barriers and succeed. That adult can be you.

Appendix 4: The Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care

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

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| <p>Standard 1 Understand the principles and values essential for fostering children and young people</p> | <p>Throughout: the importance of educational achievement to children and young people's futures.</p> <p>Awareness of discrimination and how ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background may affect learning.</p> |
| <p>Standard 2 Understand your role as a foster carer</p> | <p>The importance of the foster carer in promoting education and providing learning opportunities in daily life.</p> <p>Importance of being a role model</p> |
| <p>Standard 4 Know how to communicate effectively</p> | <p>Awareness of how communication skills may affect learning and ability to manage behaviour in a school setting.</p> <p>How to communicate with the school, social worker and education professionals to help children and young people get the most out of school and education systems.</p> |
| <p>Standard 5 Understand the development of children and young people</p> | <p>Preparing children and young people for transitions, and supporting them through transitions.</p> <p>How to provide learning and personal development opportunities through daily life and out-of-school activities.</p> <p>How to support children and young people with their education, including advocating on their behalf.</p> <p>Broad understanding of supporting disabled children and children with special educational needs with their education.</p> |
| <p>Standard 7 Develop yourself</p> | <p>Importance of foster carers as role models for valuing education, learning and development in their own lives and fostering careers.</p> |