

Teenagers in Foster Care

A handbook for foster carers and those that support them

John Coleman

with

Jane Vellacott

Graham Solari

Maggie Solari

Nikki Luke

and Judy Sebba



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About the authors

John Coleman is a clinical psychologist, and from 2006 to 2015 was a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Education, University of Oxford.

Jane Vellacott, Graham Solari and Maggie Solari are experienced foster carers of teenagers.

Dr Nikki Luke is Senior Research Fellow at the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, Department of Education at the University of Oxford.

Professor Judy Sebba is the Director of the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, Department of Education at the University of Oxford.

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01 Introduction

"At the core of fostering, you as the carer are the everyday yet exceptional person journeying alongside the young person placed with you, guiding the course with both feeling and professionalism. Whatever the reason for going into care, the young person in your placement will most likely have sad, traumatic and challenging experiences which impacted on their development and behavioural responses. Each young person is unique and your role is to help them move forward productively in life. Don't underestimate the necessity of ongoing learning for all involved, including your own birth family as well as the young person's. Through being warm and encouraging, firm and fair, you can help empower a youngster to grab life and all it offers. It's a rewarding journey."

Jane Vellacott, foster carer

This handbook is aimed at foster carers and those who support them, for example their families, supervising social workers, children's social workers, teachers, fostering providers and therapists. It provides a resource for those involved in fostering teenagers and we recommend that it is provided as part of fostering training for anyone intending to foster teenagers or at the point of new teenage placements.

In 2013, the Rees Centre and the Department of Social Policy and Intervention at Oxford University, together with the social work departments of the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Gothenburg in Sweden were awarded a grant from the ESRC to run a series of seminars entitled Teenagers in Foster Care. Six seminars took place between the beginning of 2014 and the summer of 2015 on topics including relationships with teenagers in foster care, teenage sex and risk, asylum-seeking children, juvenile justice, and leaving care.

As well as students and researchers, foster carers, young people, social workers and managers from charities and local authorities attended the events. In this way, the seminars were able to genuinely involve those concerned with these topics. As a result the discussions were extremely lively and informative.

Research findings were presented at the seminars, and these have been incorporated into the handbook. However the handbook is not a report of the research findings but a summary of the key points for foster carers. All the information in this handbook is informed by research. The discussion points in each chapter are for foster carers to self-reflect or for social workers to use in their discussions with carers. As much detail as possible has been included so that the handbook will be helpful for foster carers in their relationships with the teenagers in their care.

Further details of the seminar series including recordings and other outputs are available on the website of the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education:

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/teenagers-in-foster-care/>

02 The start of the placement

For all teenagers, family relationships can be vulnerable. For those in care, teenage years are a particularly challenging period for relationships with their foster family. There are many different routes and ways in which a young person comes into a placement, and each will bring with them particular stresses and uncertainties. While some young people may feel relieved to be in a safe place, there will be others who have arrived because of placement disruption, or because of other stressful experiences. Young people in these circumstances may appear angry, resentful or distressed. This will make things especially difficult for the carer, and situations like this will require considerable resilience on the part of the adults involved.



Asylum-seeking children who arrive into foster care will have had to manage difficult experiences and multiple pressures in their journey towards resettlement. Their background may include experiences of violence, abuse, separation from family and friends and major displacement. The process of immigration may require them to talk about their traumatic experiences as well as coping with conflicting religious, cultural and language demands.

A key factor for all teenagers who are placed in foster care, no matter what the reason for placement, is uncertainty about the future. Those who are asylum-seeking children will have no idea of what the future holds in a strange country. Those who come into foster care following placement disruption or for other reasons will also feel uncertainty about how it will be to live with this family. The previous experiences of some young asylum-seeking children may involve a lack of stability and an associated lack of trust in the adult world which will have let them down over a period of time.

These varied background factors will have a major impact on the behaviour of the young person in the first months with new foster carers. The individual arriving in a foster placement will almost certainly display some degree of mistrust, uncertainty, and reticence. This makes life particularly hard for the adults involved. It is also important to recognise that it takes a long time for the effect of powerful negative experiences to diminish and that this might not be achieved while they are living with you.

Foster carers may expect that in a few weeks the young person will settle down and accept his or her placement. This rarely happens. Adolescents may take much longer than younger children to accept new family circumstances, especially when this follows a period of upheaval and the fracturing of previously important relationships. To cope with this, foster carers will need to manage their own expectations in order not to feel disappointment or rejection. Reflective supervision and foster agency support is crucial to keep placements stable and all parties safe.

Top tips

Take a step back – try and put yourself in the young person's shoes

Remember – adjustment to change takes time for everyone and the young person may have had many moves and people interfering with their lives

Think about age and stage – different ages need different approaches

Hold on to the word trust. How is it possible to build that with someone new?

Be patient – every family is different and yours will be very different to the young person's birth family. Will the issue that's important now be so in a few weeks?

Do not expect the young person to be grateful for the home and welcome you give – it's daunting for them

For asylum-seeking children, prepare them familiar food, show signs of welcome in their native language (e.g. a sign, dictionary, contact with co-nationals), and display a calm, relaxed, and non-intrusive manner

Discussion points

1. Think about the many different routes into placement. Compare some of the ways that your foster teenagers have come into placement. What are the key differences, and how should these be managed?
2. What are the primary needs of young people as they come into foster placements? How can these be met within everyday family life?
3. As an adult, if you were placed in a strange family how would you feel? What would overwhelm you? How would you like to be treated? How can you apply this awareness to the teenager coming to live with you?
4. Many young people have had multiple placements – consider each care move or episode as an experience of traumatisation. What can you do to ease this?

03 Adolescent development

While it is essential for the foster carer to understand the individual experiences of the young person who is placed with them, it is also necessary for the carer to know something about adolescent development. The teenage years represent a particular life stage. The behaviours associated with it are experienced by adults as both puzzling and challenging. There are a number of features of this stage that will help adults to make sense of these behaviours.

In the first place the teenage years can be thought of as a transition. The key feature of transitions is an uncertainty about whether you are one or the other, in other words, whether teenagers are adult or still children. It can be useful to think that inside every teenager is BOTH a child and an adult. This may help to explain some of the inconsistent behaviour. For the young person in foster care, research suggests that this behaviour may be even more inconsistent due to the impact of earlier experiences.

As one foster carer said:

“One day they’re feeling vulnerable and tend to be more childish, and another they’re more confident and then they assert themselves. You get the pendulum swinging from one to the other. It can be very confusing and difficult to cope with.”

The second thing to recognise is the impact of puberty. For all teenagers, puberty lasts between two and three years, with girls maturing on average 18 months earlier than boys. However there is wide individual variation, and no two young people progress through puberty in the same way. The hormone balance alters markedly at this time, often leading to moody or emotional behaviour. Puberty does not just involve sexual maturation. The body changes in multiple ways, and this process can be stressful for some young

people. This is particularly true if the individual is either an early or late developer (usually defined as being three years in advance of or behind the mean for the peer group). All teenagers want to be in step with their peers, and thus to appear like everyone else. However, those who are early or late in their development may experience a sense of being out of step, and therefore different from others. This can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with one’s body, as well as challenges to identity development which research has shown is even more complex for young people in care whose family identity is unclear.

The third thing to mention is the changes that occur in the brain at this time. We have learnt a lot about the development of the brain in recent years as a result of the technology of scanning. We have learnt that there is more change in the adolescent brain than at any other time in life apart from the first three years. As a result of this new skills are developing, such as improved memory, better language and vocabulary, and more abstract thinking. However this also means major adjustment.

We have learnt that it takes a long time for the brain to settle down, probably not until the mid-20s. There are challenges for the young person in adapting to these changes. For example, it is a time when it can be difficult to regulate emotion, and when the young person may be especially influenced by short-term rewards. It can sometimes be difficult to plan and think ahead, and this may lead to risk-taking behaviour, which research reports is more prevalent in teenagers in care.

Note:

Sexuality and sexual health is addressed in section 9.

Top tips

Remember that adolescence is a stage when there is major change in the body and in the brain

These changes occur on top of all the other changes to do with being in care

Keep in mind that adolescence is a time of uncertainty, and a time of adjustment to change

Identity is a key issue at this time. Adults can play a big role in helping with the process of identity development

Discussion points

1. If the brain changes so much at this time, how do you think this affects the behaviour of young people in care?
2. What can adults provide which will help teenagers at a critical time for identity development?

04 Attachment and the foster care experience

Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space, regarded as central to a young person's emotional and behavioural development. There are many factors that will influence the degree to which a young person placed in foster care can form a new attachment to a foster carer. Two important ones are first the **age of the child or adolescent** when placed in foster care, and the second is the **presence and significance of earlier attachment figures**.

Looking first at age, most research indicates that for all teenagers, it is possible to form a new and meaningful attachment during adolescence. However the younger the individual when the placement occurs, the more chance there is for a new attachment to be formed. By contrast the older the teenager, the more difficult it will be to form an attachment to a foster carer. This is not to say that such things cannot happen. They can, but the older the teenager, the more obstacles there may be.

The second critical factor will be the place of other attachment figures who have played key roles in the earlier life of the young person. These individuals may be birth parents, other important family members, or possibly adults from previous placements. The foster carer will have a critical role to play in allowing the young person to maintain such relationships. They will be part of the individual's history, and may well have played central roles during childhood. The more the foster carer can allow these attachments to be recognised and valued, the more likely it is that the young person will be able to settle and feel confidence in the new placement.

This raises the point that there is no one single type of attachment. There are many types of attachment, and it is perfectly possible for a teenager to have attachments to multiple figures. During the teenage years adults who are important, but who are not birth parents, can play many roles. They can be advocates, supporters, someone to turn to in times of trouble, a guide and mentor. However, new attachment figures will not replace the birth parent and attachments in adolescence come in many forms. This means that the foster carer may need to help some young people to deal with feelings of guilt and disloyalty if an attachment with foster carers is developing while relationships with birth parents are complicated and not entirely positive.

The formation of attachments during adolescence involves the creation of trust between adult and young person. However because of the young person's previous experiences this is hard to accomplish. When a teenager starts to become too close to an adult this may prove very scary. The fear of being let down again, and the pain that is associated with earlier relationships, can simply overwhelm the individual. This can make any attachment impossible to sustain. Foster carers need training as well as ongoing support to deal with the roller-coaster ride which will be inevitable where fostering teenagers is concerned.



Top tips

For some young people, forming new attachments will be almost impossible because of their previous experiences

Forming new attachments in adolescence will take time

Some young people will not want or need a close attachment as they may have a significant adult already in their life

Attachments in adolescence come in many forms

It is not uncommon for adolescents to identify with peers intensively – this is a transient form of attachment

The process of pushing adults away, or keeping them at a distance, may be an essential means to protect from further hurt

The age of the young person is also important – some older teenagers will not want close attachments although some younger children will also avoid this

Many factors will determine how this will work – never underestimate the role and importance of earlier attachments

Discussion points

1. Consider the differences between the formation of attachments to new figures during early childhood and adolescence.
2. Discuss some of the mechanisms that teenagers use to protect themselves from further pain and hurt. Are there good strategies for foster carers to manage this?
3. Think about your own attachments past and present and how they impact on your own relationships and expectations.

05 Effective foster care - the STAGE framework

No matter how volatile and difficult the relationship between teenager and foster carer, the role of the carer is to build a sustainable and caring relationship. Understanding the needs of young people allows us to think about effective foster care during the teenage years. The STAGE framework can be helpful in these circumstances, and is so-called as each of the letters represents a key element of the relationship between adult and teenager for all teenagers.

The first – S – stands for **significance**. When a teenager is refusing to cooperate, staying silent, or just being rude and argumentative it is hard to imagine that the adult has an important role to play. However, research shows that adults are just as important during the teenage years as they are during childhood. Adults often feel that they have very little influence, as the young person appears to prefer their friends or peers. Yet the opposite is the case. Without a relationship with a caring and stable adult it is so much harder for a teenager to make a successful transition to adulthood.

The second letter is T – standing for **two-way communication**. Young people often say that communication with an adult involves either being asked things or being told things. This is one-way communication. It is a message that goes from the adult to the young person. Yet we know that good communication involves a two-way process. All teenagers want to feel that they are listened to, and that their voice is heard. Good communication between an adult and a young person involves as much listening as talking.

The third letter is A – **authority**. This raises the question of how adults exercise authority during the teenage years. The point here is to emphasise that the authority of an adult during adolescence cannot be based on the same principles as the use of authority during childhood. More will be said about this in the next two sections. Adult authority during this stage cannot be based on power, on force or on punishment. The adult

has a responsibility to keep the young person safe, but authority at this stage has to be based on respect, and on good communication. Rules will be more acceptable if they can be negotiated rather than imposed. A structure has to be in place, but it has to be reasonable and to take into account the age and circumstances of the individual young person.

The next letter is G – the **generation gap**. Adults are sometimes too quick to judge teenage behaviour. Such judgements can all too easily be based on the experiences of the previous generation, rather than on the experiences of today's generation of teenagers. Growing up today is very different, with the advent of social media, different sexual behaviour and changing values. Adults must be careful not to make judgements based on the attitudes of an earlier generation.

The last letter in STAGE is E – standing for **emotion**. It is worth remembering that during the teenage years the management of emotion can be very difficult. The hormone balance is unsettled, and the brain itself takes time to mature and allow good emotion regulation. In addition, research has shown that earlier distress and trauma will leave the young person with powerful emotions that may be unhelpful and even destructive. However, teenagers have the capacity to arouse strong emotions in the adults around them. Adults will certainly experience anger and frustration, but their feelings may also include elements of sadness, distress, and even shame when things go wrong. It is essential for foster carers to receive support in learning to recognise and manage their emotions. It is only in this way that adults can help young people develop a better means of managing their own feelings.

Top tips

Using the STAGE framework should help to keep in mind key elements in a relationship with a teenager

Young people need at least one key adult during this time who might not be the foster carer

Good communication requires listening as well as talking

Structure and boundaries are essential if a young person is to feel safe – achieve these through focusing on positives (e.g. respect) rather than using rules and punishments

Teenagers find it difficult to manage their own emotions, and this often has an impact on the adults' emotions

Discussion points

1. Do you think the STAGE framework is useful in your fostering? Are there things you would want to add to it to make it more relevant?
2. Is it helpful to think of adolescence as a stage? Or is it best just to see each young person as an individual on his or her own path, taking account of the age-appropriateness of the behaviour?

06 Building relationships

Thinking about attachment, as well as the elements of the STAGE framework, allows us to move on to consider what is involved in building a relationship with a young person who is coming into a new foster family. From the first meeting the foster carer will gauge the state of mind and attitude of the young person, which may reflect resentment and mistrust. This first meeting is likely to be the placement meeting, at which other professional adults will be present. The challenge for the foster carer will be to get across a message of welcome and enthusiasm for a new relationship at a very difficult time for the young person.

A key element of the young person's emotional state will be anxiety and uncertainty about the type of family he or she is about to join, the other people living in the household, the attitudes of the foster carers, and so on. For this reason the first task for the foster carer is to find ways to reassure the young person, whilst allowing room for the painful feelings to be acknowledged and expressed.

As a foster carer put it:

"If you are transparent with children and you tell them what you are doing, and they understand it is a team effort, and that it is about their future and they are part of it, it makes it easier for them."



Once this reassurance can be communicated to the young person, the next task will be to do with explaining the family circumstances, the way the household functions, and the basic ground rules that operate in the family. A lot of space and time should be allowed for getting to know the young person. Young people should be encouraged to tell their story in their own time and without feeling judged. As with all teenagers, the more the young person can be made to feel that their voice will be heard, the more likely they are to accept the rules and boundaries that are in place to keep them safe.

Research on foster care tells us that there is one essential ingredient that is necessary to build good relationships between an adolescent and a foster carer. This is to do with feeling safe. Young people themselves talk about three types of safety – physical safety, emotional safety and relational safety. Physical safety is to do with there being appropriate boundaries in place. Emotional safety is about being accepted in spite of one's moods and feelings, as well as being helped to feel good about oneself. Relational safety is about trust, and about believing that the foster carer will be there for you, will be on your side, and will pick up the pieces if things fall apart.

One care leaver reflected at the seminar on juvenile justice about feeling safe:

"I didn't want to leave prison, when the door shut [when in] I felt content, warm, I felt safe. I had my tobacco the TV and a book, everything's going be alright for 12 or 13 hours..."

Top tips

Consider all you know about the young person, the different experiences they have endured, their developmental age and the possible triggers that their care history may evoke

Think through your responses and avoid being reactive

Past experiences of hurt and rejection will play a major role in how the young person adjusts to you, your family and your home environment

Provide as much information as you can for the young person about your home, the people in it and your expectations, use different mediums for this as incessant talking may not be the best communication method

Remember that feeling safe is absolutely critical in allowing a young person to adjust to a new situation

Discussion points

1. It is often really difficult to treat all young people equally in a family, yet recognise individual needs. What is the best way to manage this dilemma?
2. Discuss some strategies for helping young people feel safe in your home, taking into account the age and differing needs of individual young people.
3. Consider how to prepare and support your birth children without breaching confidentiality and telling them too much care history.

07 Structure and boundaries, rules and sanctions

It is widely accepted that for all teenagers having boundaries and structure in place is essential for healthy adolescent development. However, this is not so easy in the foster care situation when there is so much challenging behaviour. Yet we know that without clear boundaries young people will not feel safe and contained. Of course they will posture and challenge and do everything they can to reject the boundaries set by adults. Some of this may be to do with testing out the adult, some to do with anxiety and stress and some will reflect learned behaviour. Whatever the reason, young people need a structure if they are to learn to manage their own behaviour.

A youth worker described his experiences like this:

"I think the kids who don't have any rules or limitations have a problem – it's scary for them. Kids can get very freaked out by feeling they have no boundaries, no guidelines, and it's a big fear. And although they may seem that they don't want it, they are crying out for it, and often seem so relieved when it's set out for them."

How do we set boundaries in the foster care situation?

There are four useful guidelines. First, the boundaries should be easily understood, and should be either for the benefit of the young person or for the good of the household as a whole. Secondly the boundaries, where possible, should be agreed rather than imposed. Thirdly they should be age-appropriate. Teenagers do not like to feel that they are being treated like children. Lastly adults should try and be as consistent as possible. Hold on to the boundaries, even if they are breached. It is essential to explain why the boundaries are there, and that even if the young person has broken an agreement, the structure will remain in place.

This leads on to the question of **sanctions**. It is particularly difficult in foster care to find appropriate sanctions as some of the options open to parents in a birth family are not available to foster carers. Sanctions are important, since without them the young person cannot learn about the consequences of their behaviour.

Sanctions should also be seen in the context of the balance of praise and punishment. The more rewards, recognition and endorsement the young person receives, the easier it will be to impose a sanction when things go wrong. Research has found that the more the young person feels that he or she is always on the receiving end of negative messages, the less likely it is that sanctions will have any meaning. Lastly sanctions should be chosen to be appropriate to the young person as an individual. Everyone is different, so foster carers should be careful to choose sanctions appropriate to the individual young person and their interests and concerns.



Top tips

Make sure the rules and boundaries are easily understood

Discussion and negotiation are better than imposition

Get the young person to suggest their own sanctions

Rules and boundaries should be appropriate to their developmental and chronological age and circumstances

Try and give more praise than punishment

If you focus on the positives, the negatives sometimes seem less important

Discussion points

1. Rules and boundaries are essential if a placement is to work. What do you consider the best way to ensure that these are upheld in your household?
2. The balance between praise and punishment is a recurrent theme in relationships between adults and young people. Research suggests that ideally you should use at least twice as much praise as punishment. What can be done to make this a reality in the foster care situation?
3. Using strengths-based language (e.g. 'chooses not to...' rather than 'is resistant to...') can avoid confrontation. Ask those working with you to help you reframe scenarios so you can begin to 'mind your language'.

08 Risk-taking

It is often argued that risk-taking is a normal part of adolescent behaviour for all teenagers. Such an idea can easily be linked to a negative stereotype associated with teenagers. In other words that just because you are a young person you are likely to cause trouble.

Young people themselves describe situations where adults cross the road rather than walk past a group of teenagers. One young person put it like this:

"They judge you by your age; they don't judge you by the person you are."

The idea of the teenager as risk-taker has received more attention over the last few years as a result of research on the brain. This has shown that the area of the brain associated with sensation, arousal and reward may mature earlier than the area which controls thinking, planning, and problem-solving. From this it can be concluded that teenagers take risks as they find it difficult to think ahead and understand the consequences of their actions.

Of course this is an over-simplified explanation. The brain matures in different ways in different people. In addition, behaviour is influenced as much by the environment as it is affected by the brain. The brain is only one factor in determining behaviour, and it will be obvious that some teenagers take more risks than others.

Foster carers have to deal with many types of challenging behaviour. Some of this will be shown in "acting out" or "kicking off" or self-harming in the home environment. Other types of behaviour may be more to do with risky activity outside the home, such as staying out late, absconding, getting drunk, using drugs, or breaking the law. It is especially difficult for foster carers to recognise how much this behaviour is to be expected as part of adolescence, and how much is to do with the individual young person's own background and developmental problems.

It is unlikely that a foster carer will be able to avoid having to deal with such behaviour. However, there are many things that can be done to reduce risky behaviour or to mitigate the harm that might result.

First, the more that can be done to encourage adult behaviour and to give young people age-appropriate responsibilities, the more likely it is that risk-taking will be minimised. Secondly, risk-taking is often associated with low self-esteem. Risk-taking may be lessened if the foster carer can find ways to enhance self-esteem, and to help the young person experience a sense of self-worth and achievement. Thirdly, as already mentioned, putting clear boundaries and structures in place will help the young person feel safe, and will in time lead to a lessened likelihood of risky behaviour. Finally, it is important to consider what happens when risky behaviour does happen. How does the adult respond? If the adult can find ways of managing their emotions, and remain calm and supportive, this will help enormously. A young person in foster care is only too likely to interpret criticism as rejection. If the adult can make it clear that they will remain supportive, even if the young person has messed up, this can have a big impact on future relationships.



Top tips

Remain supportive, even if the young person has made a mistake

Some risk-taking is part of growing up. Try and distinguish between that which is common experimentation and that which is excessively risky

Low self-esteem is a big factor in risky behaviour. Try and help the young person build their self-esteem

It is always good to find ways of promoting independence and giving opportunities for responsible behaviour

Think about how you respond when things do go wrong. If possible avoid anything that appears to be a rejection

Discussion points

1. There are many types of risk-taking behaviour. Explore some of the reasons why young people in care are more likely to become involved in risk-taking than other teenagers.
2. The way foster carers respond to risk-taking can make a big difference to consequences and outcomes. How should foster carers respond to this type of behaviour?

09 Sexuality and sexual health in foster care

Sexual development is a crucial feature of the teenage years for all teenagers, and nowhere more so than in the foster care situation. This is partly because young people in foster care may have experienced sexual abuse, sexual exploitation or other forms of inappropriate sexual experience. In addition to this, however, what might be called normal sexual development may be derailed as a result of trauma, dysfunctional attachments or developmental delay.

This creates a major task for the foster carer. In the first place young people in foster care will be especially in need of good education about sex and relationships. This may not have been provided in the school setting, and so extra responsibilities fall on the foster carer. Even if information has been provided in school, young people may need to be supported by foster carers to make sense of that, and to be able to ask about issues that may be worrying them in a safe environment. Furthermore, accessible and supportive sexual health services are likely to be necessary for young people in care. Foster carers need to ensure that these are provided in an appropriate manner.

Many young people in foster care will be uncertain or confused about their sexual identity and orientation and for some their gender may be causing them anxiety or distress. It is important not to judge or be dismissive in conversation with the young person. Your personal views are not relevant to your role in supporting the young person to talk, avoid risk, seek help and make informed decisions.

Topics such as consent in sexual relationships, bullying and peer pressure, and the legal framework relating to sexual relationships may all need to be acknowledged as those on which young people need appropriate guidance. The role of the birth family in discussing sexual health may need to be clarified from the outset of a placement - birth families may have strong ideas about what the young person is told and there is the potential for conflict.

Many teenagers will have had experiences prior to coming into care that make it more difficult for them to develop healthy sexual relationships. If a young person engages in inappropriate or unsafe sex this poses a significant challenge for the foster carer. Safe and trusting relationships with foster carers can be a powerful tool for safeguarding teenagers and building their resilience in day-to-day life. Carers need training so that they are aware of, and learn how to mitigate, some of the risks to young people where sexuality is concerned.



When young people do come into care following sexual exploitation or sexual abuse, it is all too easy to label them as 'victims' or as 'being at risk'. This is not helpful, since it ignores the differences between young people's reactions to these experiences and their capacity to manage these effects. We need to recognise the different perspectives that young people bring to this issue. We should underline the importance of seeing young people as individuals who have resources and capabilities. Building on the strengths of the individual can be the most helpful way of mitigating risk.

Sexual health is likely to prove one of the most difficult areas for foster carers to manage. Some feel that they are not equipped to discuss sex with troubled teenagers, and that they do not have the background and experience to handle such sensitive issues in an appropriate manner. It is here that training, the provision of suitable resources, supervision from the social worker and peer support are absolutely essential if foster carers are to play an effective role in addressing such matters.

Top tips

Find acceptable ways of providing as much information about sex and sexuality to young people in foster care e.g. watching a TV programme together and discussing points raised

Keep in mind the anxieties and uncertainties that will be associated with sex for young people in care

Try to be open about discussing sex – it's a natural process. If sex is seen as something abusive or upsetting, this will affect behaviour

Foster carers have a key role to play in keeping young people safe from sexual risk

It is important for adults to be sensitive to young people's sexual identity or sexual orientation

Be sure you know something about child sexual exploitation (CSE), and learn to recognise the signs that the young person may be at risk

Discussion points

1. How is it best to provide sex and relationships education for young people in care?
2. Sexual acting out and sexual risk-taking is not uncommon among young people in care. This poses great challenges for foster carers. Are there things that carers can do to manage such behaviour and to help young people avoid such risks and protect themselves in such situations?
3. Foster carers may feel they have to prevent youngsters experimenting with sex. Why is this and what support might be offered?

10 Expectations and aspirations

Things rarely turn out as predicted when a young person comes into placement.

A foster parent expressed this well when she said:

"It's never what you expect!"

In other words, however much you prepare, and no matter how much information you receive beforehand, the actual experiences are almost certainly going to contain many surprises and unexpected twists and turns.

Another factor that is important is the differing expectations of the foster carer and those of the young person coming into a placement. For many carers there is a belief that a teenager coming into foster care has missed out on, and therefore needs, a good experience of home life. In other words, the carer has the expectation that what they can offer – a caring family setting, good meals, a warm bed, and encouraging words – will be the answer to turning this young person's life around. While these ingredients are important for some, especially for younger children, it may be years before a troubled and traumatised teenager can begin to draw strength from family life.

In situations where a young person has been let down or even abused by adults in the past, it will be a long time before basic trust with new adults can be established. Indeed, many teenagers find this almost impossible, particularly when the pain of previous rejections remains a key feature of their inner lives.

As one young person put it:

"It is better to destroy the relationship before it destroys me."

It is essential for foster carers to be able to manage their expectations. Building trust is a slow process, and home life may be too far outside the young person's experience for this to be meaningful at the beginning of a placement. Of course family life should form a solid background to whatever work is done with the young

person. However more may be needed before any progress can be achieved.

A theme which was frequently expressed in our seminar series was a concern about the gap between the expectations of the adult world in terms of what young people in care can achieve, and their aspirations and capabilities. All too often young people in care are held back by the low expectations held about them by teachers and other professionals.

The role of the foster carer is to be an advocate, a cheerleader and a believer in the capabilities of the young people in their care. They should take seriously the aspirations of young people, and work to enable those aspirations to become reality.

This was expressed clearly by a care leaver in one of the seminars:

"Those who are not here are the ones who are dying of drug overdoses. They need to be lifted up. We need to take care of them. I hope you are the people who are going to lift them up and tell them they can do everything."

One route to fostering the aspirations of young people in care is to take what is called a strengths-based approach. In essence this means to focus on the strengths and resources of the individual, rather than concentrating only on the problems and difficulties. It is all too easy for adults to become pre-occupied with the problem, rather than seeing the young person in the round. In this way the interests, motivations, resources and capacities of the young person get pushed to one side. To use a strengths-based approach involves a shift in perspective. Look for the strengths, and see how you can build on those. Bring those to the fore, and the problems will move to the background.

Top tips

Be careful with your expectations. Things almost always turn out differently from what is expected!

Most young people in care have very mixed feelings about 'ordinary' family life. It may take a long time often into adulthood before they can appreciate this

Encourage young people to have aspirations – as one foster carer said:
"Don't cloud your young person's genius"

Foster carers have a key role to play as advocates

Discussion points

1. Educational achievement of young people in care is hindered by a number of factors including for example, frequent school moves. How can foster carers best work to help young people achieve the very best in their education?
2. How can the home, school and social work team work together for fostered teenagers?
3. What does a strengths-based approach mean for your day-to-day relationship with the young person in your care? Are you focusing on strengths in your communication?

11 Coordination – getting the best for young people

One of the most challenging elements of the foster care situation is that there are two sets of relationships involved. On the one hand, the carer is working within a statutory process. On the other, he or she is forging a relationship with a young person who is often vulnerable and anxious. This places considerable strain on the foster carers and on the family as a whole. Foster carers report that they feel an enormous pressure to 'get it right'. However the situation is often volatile and changeable, and it is not always clear what 'getting it right' actually means.



Good coordination is at the heart of the process, yet in today's environment there is constant turn-around within the social work profession. Foster carers report that they have to manage a situation of continual change both among local authority social workers, as well as with the supervising social workers who oversee their work. This makes coordination exceptionally difficult.

The process begins with the placement agreement. The foster carer will be asked to sign an agreement, sometimes with very little background information and with little time to seek further detail. Advice that experienced foster carers give is to take as much time as can be managed at this stage, and to be insistent about learning as much as possible about the young person and their previous experiences. Information about the birth family, and about previous placements,

is invaluable at this point in time. This is also a key stage to involve the young person about how they hope life will be in a new placement, rather than 'talking behind their backs'. It is also essential to get agreement during this process about delegated authority.

Over the course of the placement there will be a range of reviews to attend, and plans to put in place. These may include a pathway plan, a children looked after review, a pupil education plan, and so on. Terminology may vary from authority to authority and country to country. It will be essential for foster carers to play a major role in the drawing up of these plans, and in the monitoring of progress. However, without good coordination between professionals and some stability among social workers these tasks will be problematic. For foster care to work on behalf of young people in care, the local authority must put in place a good and effective system of coordination between social workers and foster carers.

As one young person explained in one of the seminars: ***"Sometimes young people in care, at these meetings, they sit at a table with 6 or 8 professionals, and they think: "What am I doing here?" and everything is going on around them. So that is a gap we can close."***

Finally much discussion in our seminar series turned on the necessity to have good training for carers. Without training and on-going support it will be almost impossible for carers to provide the level of support that is needed by the vulnerable young people being placed in foster care today. In particular it was felt that extra training should be seen as imperative for those foster carers taking specialist placements. Without this, carers in such situations cannot be expected to provide the environment that is necessary for very troubled or demanding teenagers.

Top tips

Seek as much information as possible at the placement meeting. If there are gaps in information, request that these are followed up

Be clear about what decisions you have the authority to make

Do as much as you can to make sure the voice of the young person is heard at the meeting

Try and be resilient to pressures from statutory authorities

Be assertive and persistent in asking for appropriate training and support

Remember you are the 'agent' of change for the child or young person. You live with them – use your voice

Discussion points

1. How can you involve the reluctant young person in a planning meeting, how could their views be represented if they don't want to attend?
2. How can foster carers influence the coordination of the activities, inputs and demands of different services?

12 Moving on

All foster carers will be required to manage situations where young people move on, either to independence or to another placement. This experience will create strong feelings, not only in those who are being fostered, but in the foster family too.

Moves from one placement to another are never straightforward. In most cases these will occur either because the behaviour of the young person becomes too challenging or difficult, or because the individual young person finds the particular foster carers impossible to live with. Either way, emotions such as loss, sadness, guilt and anger will be created by such a situation, and these are difficult to manage. In the best of circumstances foster carers will be given support at these times. If the feelings are left to fester, this will make it that much harder for the foster carer to work well with the next young person who comes into their care. As part of moving on it is sometimes helpful in particular for the young person's identity to have a photo album or memory book - something that captures where the young person came from, the people that they lived with, things they did together, and wishes for the future.

The transition to independence can also be a difficult process. Far too few resources are available for those who leave care. Furthermore the expectation that relationships can simply be brought to an end at age 18, or even at 21, is clearly unrealistic. As one foster carer put it: Transitions are not linear. In other words leaving a foster care situation will not necessarily progress in a straight line. In most families in England today leaving home takes many years. Young people yo-yo back and forth, go away to college or university, come home for a while, move off to live somewhere else, but then move back again as their circumstances change. It is regrettable that this opportunity to move to independence in a gradual manner is not open to those in foster care.

Moving to independence has to be seen as a major transition. Transitions were mentioned earlier in the adolescent development section. All young people need help when faced with transitions. As an example, the transition from primary to secondary school is considered to be a transition which requires considerable preparation and support. So it should be with transition to independence from foster care.

Foster carers can do a lot to ease this process. This may be a good point to mention the development of resilience. The notion of resilience has to do with the ability to manage adversity and overcome setbacks. In a literal sense resilience means to bounce back. Resilience develops as a result of the internal resources of the individual, the degree of support they get from those around them, and the nature of the wider community in which they live.

Foster carers can help prepare the young person for independence by working through the challenges that the individual is likely to face, and by assisting him or her to develop resources and skills to meet the challenges of independence. The stronger the self-esteem of the young person, and the more resilient they are, the more likely they will be to manage the move to independence in a successful manner.



Top tips

When a young person has to move to a different placement, make sure you talk to others about your feelings. Don't let them fester

Do as much preparation as possible before a young person moves to independence

Think through the meaning of resilience with your young person. Try and help them develop a resilient attitude and think about what will help them deal with the challenges of living on their own

Discussion points

1. Loneliness is one of the most common experiences of young people after they leave care. How is it possible to prepare a young person for independence and for the loneliness they may well experience?
2. What does resilience mean in this context, and how can you promote resilience in vulnerable young people in your care?
3. Why do we expect young care leavers to cope with situations grown adults don't usually face for another 10 years or more?

Further reading

Bond, H. (2008)

Ten Top Tips for Preparing Care Leavers

London: BAAF

Coleman, J. (2014)

Why Won't My Teenager Talk to Me?

London: Routledge

Farmer, E., Moyers, S. and Lipscombe, J. (2004)

Fostering adolescents

London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Gilligan, R. (2009)

Promoting Resilience

London: BAAF

Hayman, S. and Coleman, J. (2016)

Parents and digital technology

London: Routledge

Pallett, C. et al. (2015)

Managing Difficult Behaviour

London: CoramBAAF

Schofield, G. and Beek, M. (2014)

Promoting Attachment and Resilience

London: BAAF

Timpson, J. (2015)

A guide to attachment and how it can affect people's lives

Manchester: Timpson Ltd

Wade, J., Sirriyeh, A., Kohli, R. & Simmonds, J. (2012)

Fostering unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people

London: BAAF

Final word

This handbook has tried to address the key areas facing foster carers who foster teenagers and those supporting them. The content emerged from a seminar series in which young people, foster carers, professionals, policy makers and researchers discussed the main challenges and identified strategies found to be effective. Throughout this handbook, research evidence has informed the points made. We hope it will help those who take on this challenging and much-needed role.

Further resources from the seminars are available at:

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/teenagers-in-foster-care/>

Notes

Notes



“At the core of fostering, you as the carer are the everyday yet exceptional person journeying alongside the young person placed with you, guiding the course with both feeling and professionalism. Whatever the reason for going into care, the young person in your placement will most likely have sad, traumatic and challenging experiences which impacted on their development and behavioural responses. Each young person is unique and your role is to help them move forward productively in life. Don’t underestimate the necessity of ongoing learning for all involved, including your own birth family as well as the young person’s. Through being warm and encouraging, firm and fair, you can help empower a youngster to grab life and all it offers. It’s a rewarding journey.”

Jane Vellacott – foster carer

This handbook is produced from the ESRC seminar series ‘Teenagers in Foster Care’. Further resources from all the seminars are available on the website of the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education:

<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/teenagers-in-foster-care/>