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'A little piece of my heart goes with each of them' – foster carer reflections on current fostering practice

Abstract

In the UK foster care is the main way of looking after children in care. Foster carers have been reported to be motivated to foster by an intrinsic desire to nurture and improve the lives of children and young people. However there are challenges in fostering related to relationships with other professionals involved in children's lives and a lack of support for children and young people with complex needs. The number of allegations against foster carers increases the potential for foster carer stress and exit from fostering. This article reports on findings from an online survey of more than 420 foster carers and eight interviews during a global COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in the closure of schools and other social settings and services for prolonged periods of time. The findings highlight two key themes of transformative professional relationships and translations of professional love. Recommendations for professional training across disciplines are suggested.

Keywords: Fostering; foster carers; children; social workers; stress

Introduction

In the UK, foster care is the main way of looking after children in care and as at 31 March 2021, just over a quarter of local authority fostering households (8,045) had family and friends care as their primary placement offer (27%) with the remainder residing with non family and friends households (National Statistics, 2021). Given the histories of maltreatment, family dysfunction and absent parenting among children in care, the relationships they form with their carers has been found to be a major influence on future developmental outcomes and a source of recovery from previous adversity (Hill, 2009; Withington, *et al.,* 2017; Sprecher *et al*., 2021). It follows then that unless fostering practice is felt to reflect the views and experiences of foster carers, it may lack the effectiveness needed to recruit and retain foster carers. This is important given the growth rate in the number of children in care. This article contributes to knowledge about foster carer experiences by gathering views via an online survey and in-depth interviews.

Motivation to foster

Although individual motivation to foster may be complex and based on many factors, two main forms of motivation have been reported: intrinsic and extrinsic (Rodgers *et al*, 2006). In relation to fostering, intrinsic motivators may include: a sense of altruism or religious affiliations, foster carers' desire to have a child of their own to raise and love, a desire to prevent harm, to provide company for an only child or to fill a void created by an 'empty nest' (Rodgers *et al*, 2006). Key motivating factors can be meeting or knowing other foster carers as a child or adult or, less often, contact with a fostered child or young person (Sebba, 2012). Additionally, many kinship carers experience a sense of obligation but may also be motivated by personal life experiences and prior professional experiences (Blackburn, 2015).

From a survey of 539 foster carers Denby *et al* (1999) found that whilst intrinsic motivators are central to the initial decision to foster, extrinsic motivators are a crucial factor in the retention of carers. Levels of financial compensation, clarity of expectations and a sense of being valued by key professionals are important factors (Randle *et al*, 2016; Rodger, 2006). The ability to continue fostering also relies largely on social and professional relationships (Narey and Owers, 2018; Denby *et al,* 1999). Effective communication with agency workers and other foster parents can support carers to remain in their role and ineffective communication with others can leads to challenges.

Challenges in fostering

Communication, relationships with and support from other agencies
As mentioned above, a challenge reported by foster carers in their fostering role relates to communication and relationships with Local Authorities, Independent Fostering Associations and social workers as well as the communication between professionals within these organisations (Blackburn, 2015; 2016). This is not surprising given findings from Narey and Owers (2018: 4) who interviewed 100 children living in foster care and noted inconsistent relationships with social workers. Whilst some children spoke highly of their social worker, others described feeling 'invisible'. A common concern amongst the children interviewed and their carers was the frequent changes in social workers which might contribute to challenges reported above by foster carers.

Challenging behaviour

A further challenge reported for foster carers is perceived challenging behaviour from children. Before entering the care system, many children experience several layers of disadvantage with around 63% of those entering care experiencing neglect or abuse (DfE, 2019). Abuse and/or neglect can leave a child susceptible to difficulties in regulating emotions and forming relationships and cognitive and physical developmental delays (Cecil *et al*, 2017; Dubois-Comtoisa, *et al* 2016). In turn, these difficulties and delays can result in higher levels of emotional and behavioural problems than children of the same age who have not experienced maltreatment. A study by Murray *et al* of 17 foster carers in New Zealand found that participants reported high levels of stress and that supporting children's mental health difficulties resulted in a "high burden of care" (2011:15) which is exacerbated by a lack of appropriate training. Foster children's behavioural difficulties can increase the risk of placement disruption and present a significant challenge to foster carer wellbeing (Octoman *et al*, 2014; Leathers, 2006). However, Leathers also highlighted a range of other contributing factors such as the children's age and/or the qualities of foster homes and explored the possibility that accounts of challenging behaviours become inflated by caseworkers and/or foster carers as they are recalled. Dubois-Comtoisa *et al* suggested that whilst the background of children entering the care system is important, the backgrounds of foster carers themselves can be of equal consequence. The authors suggest that the level of foster carer's commitment, the number of placements and the age of the child at the time of placement influence the foster child's ability to adjust to their new surroundings and subsequent behavioural issues.

Harding, Murray, Shakespeare-Finch and Frey (2018) researched placement, carer, and child characteristics related to perceived foster parent stress in a sample of 158 foster and kin carers in Queensland, Australia. Carers completed a self-report online survey that assessed parenting stress, and carer perceptions of the child in their care and the child protection system. Overall, foster carers reported high stress, with 20% in the clinical range on the Parenting Stress Index (PSI-4-SF). This stress was significantly higher for those providing care for children with carer-reported high emotional and behavioural problems. Both foster carer stress and the child's emotional and behavioural challenges were significantly related to placement factors, such as, the length of time the child had been in their current placement, and the child protection court order under which the child had been placed.

Support for foster carers

The increasingly complex needs of children in care, and the impact on viability of placements has resulted in wide spread acknowledgement of the need to provide carers with a range of support services (Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Sinclair *et al.,* 2000) including culturally sensitive and sophisticated support mechanisms (Thompson and Rickford, 2000). Alongside professional, the importance of peer support is also recognised. Carers report that support and advice from other carers is crucial – particularly during times of uncertainty. Narey and Owers highlight *The Mockingbird Family Model*. This project creates networks (or constellations) between foster homes. One foster home acts as a hub which, supported by a liaison officer, offers peer support, coaching, planned and emergency respite care, and social events for families. It is reported that this model, through increasing support and reducing isolation, is improving placement stability (Narey and Owers, 2018). A further consideration is the dual and sometimes overlapping or even conflicting roles played by foster carers. Schofield *et. al.,* (2013: 46) suggested that foster carers primarily identify as carers or as parents, but that some foster carers could move flexibly between these roles while others could not. For foster carers who could be flexible, the two roles enriched each other rather than causing stress and role conflict. This has implications for supporting professional foster carers who can also meet the parenting needs of long-term foster children.

Aims and objectives

This paper reports on selected findings of an external independent evaluation of a fostering membership service.   The paper focuses on foster carers' motivation and experiences of fostering, foster carer wellbeing and relationship with other professionals.

Research questions were:
1. What are the experiences of foster carers of current fostering practice?
2. What are the factors that enable and promote foster carer motivation to remain in fostering?

Research methodology and methods

Using a mixed-methods approach the study combined findings from an online survey and in-depth interviews with foster carers. The survey was trialled with two foster carers before being promoted via social media and circulated via email to 18,000 foster carers who are members of a Department for Education (DfE) funded membership service. The survey

comprised a combination of closed questions related to fostering experiences as well as open questions designed to elicit more information. Interviews provided the opportunity for foster carers to describe further details of fostering experiences. Eight foster carers were selected by the researchers for in-depth interview and discussion utilising an online telephone platform. The interview participants were selected from a small number of survey respondents who provided their contact details and indicated their interest in participation in an interview. Selecting participants from a socially and culturally diverse cross section was important so attention was paid to protected characteristics such as gender, age, (dis)ability and family circumstances when selecting the interview sample. Quantitative data from closed/rating survey questions is displayed as frequencies; in qualitative data, *a priori* themes was analysed to address research questions and emergent themes then identified.

Sampling

Participants for interviews were selected to provide a maximal variation of foster carers including diversity of social and cultural variables. All research participants were treated equally regardless of gender, colour, ethnic or national origin, (dis)ability, socio-economic background, religious or political beliefs, trades union membership, family circumstances, sexual orientation or other irrelevant distinction.

Ethical considerations

Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) informed day-to-day conduct and ethical standards. Approval was sought from (Authors University ethics committee) for review of ethical issues related to the study as a whole.

Participants were briefed and provided with an information sheet explaining the nature, purpose and planned dissemination of the evaluation. Participants' right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any stage of the project was explicitly stated and at all times respected. A guarantee of confidentiality was provided and anonymity maintained at all times. No links between participants and locations is included in outputs to further secure anonymity. Pseudonyms have replaced names and establishments.

Findings

Survey

422 responses were received to the online survey. It is important to note that for the survey not all respondents answered all questions. Therefore total responses for the survey findings do not always equate to 100%. In terms of demographics, the majority of respondents live in the South East (19.2%), South West (16.4%), North West (15.2%), West Midlands (14.2%) or East Midlands (11.8%). However there were respondents also from Yorkshire and Humber (7.8%), North East (7.3%), East of England (5.2%) and London (3.3%). 190 (45%) live in a town, 142 (33.6%) live in a village and the remaining 90 (21.3%) live in a city. The majority (352 or 83.4%) were female, 66 (15.6%) male, one female to male transgender and three preferred not to say. 282 (66.8%) were married, 89 (21.1%) single, 41 (9.7%) living together, eight preferred not to say and two were in a civil partnership. 12 respondents (2.8%) were members of the member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community and 18 reported having a disability. Nearly half of all respondents were aged 51-60 and the majority (89.3% or 377 respondents) were white British.

Fostering experience

Respondents had been fostering for varied lengths of time from less than a year (45 respondents) to more than 20 years (29 respondents). The highest number of respondents had been fostering for 2 – 5 years (99 respondents) or 5-10 years (97 respondents). Just over half of all respondents (255 respondents) had fostered 10 or less children, with a smaller number (83 respondents) having fostered between 10 and 20 children. Other respondents had fostered larger numbers of children. The number of children being fostered by respondents also varied greatly with the majority either fostering one child (178 respondents) or two children (121 respondents). Smaller numbers of respondents were fostering five or more (3 respondents) and 55 respondents were not fostering any children at all at the present time.

Views on fostering
Motivation to foster

The majority (345 or 81.8%) of respondents were motivated to foster by an intrinsic desire to provide a safe nurturing environment. A smaller number (roughly one third) fostered because they had available space and fewer entered fostering because it was suggested to them, they saw an advertisement for fostering or viewed it as a source of income. A minority of respondents (18) wanted to provide Kinship care, followed by having empathy for others (9

respondents) and wanting to give back after having been fostered personally (8 respondents). Participants were able to select more than one response and it is clear that motivation can be multi-dimensional.

Enjoyable aspects of fostering

The most enjoyable aspect of fostering reported by 94.5% of respondents (399) was providing a secure base for children followed closely by developing a positive bond with foster children (367 or 87%).

Other important aspects of fostering included the personal satisfaction from seeing foster children's growing confidence (362 or 85.8%), helping children with practical issues (302 or 71.6%), increasing their own understanding of child development (260 or 61.6%), helping children with friendships (233 (55.2%). Less significant but still important were helping children with school work (209 (49.5%), attending training (205 or 48.6%), sharing ideas with other foster carers (199 or 47.2%), working with other agencies (177 or 41.9%), relationship with birth parents (105 or 24.9%) and others. Included in the category labelled 'other other enjoyable aspects' were multiple individual comments mainly relating to enriching children's lives for example:

- Giving holidays, days out, clothes, socialising;

- Helping the child to move on to forever placements with confidence and keeping in touch to hear their progress and provide support to their birth/adoptive family;

- Just seeing the difference you can make by not giving up on someone;

- Helping children develop a strong and secure sense of self. Filling in their gaps in early development;

- Giving children a family who accepted them as they are forever;

- My daughter and I both love having more children in the house, we feel it completes our family and we love helping our foster children to feel part of our loved family;

- Taking in children that would otherwise be in a residential setting and those that have complex needs;

- Helping a child unpick and manage the trauma using therapeutic methods.

However, some comments were also about families or fostering more broadly:

- Not all fostering is childcare. Its parent and child too - so I enjoy helping young parents form a positive and healthy bond with their baby;

- Supporting parents to remain with their children where possible.

Challenges for foster carers

Just over half of respondents indicated that children's behaviour represented the most significant challenge (225 or 53.3%) and a further third (130 or 30.8%) highlighted allegations. Nearly a third (126 or 26.9%) mentioned relationships with birth parents and a lack of support (118 or 28%) as being challenging. Other less commonly reported but no less challenging issues included funding (93 or 22%), relationship with Local Authority (82 or 19.4%), relationship with social worker (80 or 19%), other challenges (41 or 9.7%), relationship with educators (31 or 7.3%), access to training 17 or 4%), relationship with fostering agency (13 or 3.1%).

PLACE Figure 1: Challenges for foster carers HERE

The challenges of relationships with services, child behaviour and relationships/bonds with children, and the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic, were exemplified by the following comments:

> We love our job…however we were with a private fostering agency and they could not provide the children that we felt we could help with best so we went to a local authority we have a lot of social worker problems as they do not remain in their posts for more than what appear to be just a few weeks or months.

> Parting with them when they move on even though I know it is the right thing for them. A little piece of my heart goes with each of them.

> We know the pandemic has put a strain on services and time, but we feel the expectation and demand put on us has been far beyond what was explained in our training.

Continuation of fostering role

176 foster carers (41.7%) had considered leaving fostering at some point in their fostering career (see Table 2). A high number of participants stated that they felt unsupported by their social workers and foster agencies. Nine participants went further than this and described their relationship with social workers and fostering agencies as 'poor'. Sentiments expressed by this participant were repeated in the other eight responses: [There was a] "lack of support, feeling that our opinion is not worth anything, a general lack of respect from other professionals."

The reported lack of support was felt most acutely during times of crisis such as when the child in their care had been violent either towards them or other family members. Allegations made against foster carers were also cited as a time when support was needed but not received. Additionally, participants noted the length of time taken to resolve allegations (approximately a year) which contributed significantly to their sense of anxiety and distress. A lack of support during difficult placements and allegations contributed to the five most frequently cited reasons for considering leaving fostering.

PLACE Table 1: Factors contributing to foster carers considering leaving fostering HERE

Where foster carers had remained in fostering, a variety of factors influenced carers to stay in fostering, the most frequently reported of which (79.8% of respondents) was that they enjoyed their fostering role and did not want to leave. The commitment to the children in their care provided sufficient motivation to remain in fostering roles despite the challenges experienced. Where participants felt they had been supported effectively by social workers and/or fostering agencies they commented on the difference this had made to their ability to continue fostering. One stated "My fostering agency recognised how difficult the placement had become, how hard I worked… they gave me a paid three month break to recharge with support from my social worker". This response demonstrates the positive impact of a foster agency treating the carer with trust and respect. However, overwhelmingly participants attributed their decision to stay in foster caring to their personal commitment to the children.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with eight respondents to explore themes resulting from analysis of survey data in greater depth. Seven of the eight foster carer participants were female; three were 41-50 and the remainder 51-60. There was a fairly even spread of participants across the country from the South West to Yorkshire and Humber. Two participants identified as

being disabled. The majority were White British and the remaining participant was of White and Black African heritage. The length of time fostering for interview participants ranged from 18 months to nineteen years. Motivation to foster was also wide ranging from previous personal experience to changing family circumstances.

Current wellbeing

Five participants described their overall wellbeing as 'good'. For three of these the reason for this was due to the child/ren they were looking after being a good fit with their own family, whilst for another it was because she did not currently have a placement. The remaining three described their wellbeing as 'low' due to an allegation or stressed/struggling due to Covid-19 causing the child stress and/or having vulnerable adults living in the house whilst numerous professionals needed to visit the house.

Most enjoyable day in fostering

Participants described their most enjoyable day in fostering mostly in light of the achievements of children and young people they had supported as exemplified by the following comments:

> It was the first time she had asked for help and volunteered, like, I'm not scared to come to you because I know you're not going to shout at me for doing that. And it was such a huge, like, trust bond moment where the light bulb had shone. (Participant 3)

> My most enjoyable day of fostering is probably out and about somewhere, doing things, being together, having fun. Just all being together. (Participant 6)

> When the children themselves turn round and just give you a hug or just say something lovely which is unexpected or thank you for something that you've done which didn't seem significant. (Participant 8)

Other highlights for participants included: children receiving a Head Teacher's award; a challenging child asked for help; a hug from a child; walking a previous fostered child down the aisle and adopting a fostered child.

Most challenging day

Not surprisingly, participants reported the most challenging day in foster carers as one that involved a complex situation related to a child. These ranged from violence from a child;

children who frequently absconded; attempted suicide by a child; a child who was newly arrived to the country showing videos of children being hanged; having to tell a child their birth parent had passed way.

> The most challenging day was a child who was having a mental breakdown. He was ten and he tried to commit suicide by jumping in front of the social worker's car whilst it was moving on the road. And it resulted in having to call police officers to restrain him because he had absolutely lost the plot. And the challenging thing about it was not just trying to get him to calm down, because he came inside and destroyed the house. The challenging bit was the social worker not supporting us appropriately. (Participant 3)

> A child disclosed abuse during lockdown. It was mainly to do with the fact that she was out of our county. So, when referrals were being made, you would go to them and they said well, she's not from our county she's out of county therefore she's not entitled to it. All of this just takes so long and laborious… she's not accessed the support and the therapy that she needs. (Participant 8)

Continuation of fostering role

Seven participants admitted they had considered leaving fostering either because of an allegation (two participants), poor relationship with a social worker, a traumatic placement, challenging children or lack of support:

> I adore the children and I adore the job itself of looking after them. It's just very difficult sometimes to accept decisions which you can see damage the child…You know, you put all this work in to try and make sure the kid's okay and then a social worker will walk in and obliterate that child in five minutes. In my mind I was just like, I could deal with the kids but actually I'm not sure I can deal with social services' response to that. (Participant 3)

All participants stated they remained in foster care due to their commitment to the children.

Discussion

This study explored the views and experiences of foster carers through an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Data collection was undertaken during a global pandemic at a time of varying degrees of national lockdown in the UK. Despite this additional stress for

families, 422 responses were received to an online survey and eight carers participated in a semi-structured telephone interview. The findings have been drawn together in two over-arching themes for this discussion: *Courage to carry on – transformative professional relationships; Pieces of my heart – translations of professional love.*

Courage to carry on - transformative professional relationships

Findings from this study suggest that social workers and fostering agencies have the potential to create, develop and nurture transformative relationships with foster carers as discussed below.

The findings from the survey and interviews highlight foster carers thoughts of leaving fostering due to unsupportive or in some cases poor relationships with social workers and/or fostering agencies, particularly during allegations where foster carers described their wellbeing as low. This was described as "lack of support, feeling that our opinion is not worth anything, a general lack of respect from other professionals". This also translates into foster carers' descriptions of their most challenging day being related to allegation situations and difficult relationships with social workers which has the potential to undermine confidence and wellbeing as noted by one survey participant 'We went through a period of social workers changing, nobody knew the case and I felt alone'.

However, when relationships with social workers and agencies were reported as supportive this has the potential to transform the fostering experience and increase the likelihood that foster carers will continue their fostering role:

> The allegation was tough and I had to find the strength to carry on really but
> this gentleman [from a membership support service] supported me… He was
> just very, very genuine and I felt like he did believe in me that gave me the
> courage to carry on (Interview Participant 7).

This stresses the important role social workers and fostering agencies have in the retention of foster carers not mention their wellbeing as previously noted (Narey and Owers, 2018; Denby *et al,* 1999). It is important to foster carers that they are valued and respected by other professionals (Rodgers *et al.*, 2006; Randle *et al,* 2016).The findings of this study also suggest that continuity of social workers is paramount to foster carer wellbeing and ultimately retention,

Pieces of my heart – translations of professional love

Findings from this study reinforce the complex nature of motivation to foster as noted earlier (Denby *et. al*, 1999; Rodgers *et al,* 2006; Sebba, 2012; Blackburn, 2015, Randle *et al*, 2016) but demonstrate an overwhelming desire to provide a safe nurturing space for children. This motivation translates into fostering practice in two ways. Firstly foster carers describe their most enjoyable day and overall wellbeing in terms of relational aspects of their relationship with children. Secondly the resilience and willingness to continue fostering, despite challenges such as allegations, appears to arise from considerable affection for children. This affection is characterised for some survey participants as 'distress caused by placements ending with children they have grown to love'. The vocabulary of 'love' was used in other ways by participants:

> My daughter and I both love having more children in the house, we feel it completes our family and we love helping our foster children to feel part of our loved family, so they can enjoy their time with us as far as possible, have a secure base here, and have happy memories here form part of their positive life story and for a future successful life. (Survey Participant)

One survey participant captured the conflict between the distinct challenges involved in foster caring on one hand and their own commitment to and 'love' for children on the other, stating: 'We went through a period of social workers changing, nobody knew the case and I felt alone. This was in addition to inconsistent decisions and money; if we hadn't fallen in love with our placement I think it would have been very different' (Survey Participant).

The affection for children mentioned in these statements is reminiscent of the concept of professional love (Page, 2014; Blackburn, 2016) whereby professionals acknowledge their own emotional attachment to children that extends beyond the desire to provide basic needs of comfort and safety. Page (2018) made a compelling argument for professional practice with children to be informed by a "pedagogy of love", ensuring that all children "know and understand that they are worthy of being loved", providing a basis for their "emotional resilience, learning and ultimately independence" (Page 2018: 134). Children and young people require "sensitive, skilled, loving, special adults with whom they have formed a deep and sustaining relationship" (Page, 2014: 125). The professional engages in a reciprocal relationship with the child and buttresses and complements familial love for the child. This

contributes to the mutual enhancement of both participants' wellbeing. Page suggests that this practice can be characterised as Professional Love. Even when participants in this study haven't used the word love, arguably it is evident in their responses for example 'I have considered leaving fostering, the compassion fatigue is significant, but I couldn't let the child down' (Survey Participant).This is an interesting finding given the assertion from Dubois-Comtoisa *et. al.,* (2016) that whilst the background of children entering the care system is a factor in children's challenging behaviour and consequent foster carer stress, the level of foster carer's commitment and other characteristics are an important influence on the child's ability to adjust to their new surroundings and subsequent behavioural issues. Therefore the concept of professional love might be an interesting notion for foster carer and other professional training.

Strengths and weaknesses of the study

The strength of this study is the large response to the survey. Over 420 foster carers completed the online survey, despite COVID-19 pandemic challenges, and eight of them participated in semi-structured telephone interviews. This provided both breadth and depth of information on the experiences of foster carers in fulfilling their caring roles. However the lack of diversity in the survey sample (mostly female, mature, married and white British) is disappointing and future research could explore the experiences of diverse groups of foster carers. Whilst the survey respondents were self-selecting, the interview sample was selected by researchers from a small number of survey participants who indicated their interest in participation in interviews. We endeavoured to ensure the interview sample was a diverse as possible from the small group who had shown interest, however it cannot be perceived as a representative sample. In addition it would have been beneficial to explore the experiences of fostering agencies and social workers to compare and contrast the accounts given by foster carers in this article.

Conclusions and implications

This study shows a strong interaction in relationships between foster carers and other professionals on the wellbeing, resilience and motivation to foster. The DfE priorities children in care, and values the role of foster carers in the lifelong achievement and wellbeing of children and young people in care. Foster carers do not operate in a silo. They are supported by a network of agencies, professionals and membership services. The authors

recommend that research into the relationshipa and communication between other professionals (social workers, fostering agencies and police officers) and foster carers be undertaken in order to understand current practices. In addition, training for social workers, LAs and independent fostering agencies as well as other professionals such as police criminal justice professionals about sensitive, relational and professional approaches to working with foster carers and children in care needs to be considered following research into current practices.

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