

Fostering a creative relationship

Play and creative activities can help foster carers build warm and caring relationships with looked after children and young people. Looking after other people's children can sound ordinary but foster carers need to be very creative to engage with and build relationships with looked after children and young people.

'Ordinary people doing extraordinary things' is how the Children's Workforce Development Council described foster carers (CWDC 2007). Public health guidance says that all looked after children and young people should receive care that:

encourages warm and caring relationships between child and carer that nurture attachment and create a sense of belonging so that the child feels safe, valued and respected.

(NICE/SCIE 2010)

Creating this sense of belonging is at the heart of the foster carer's work.

Communicating effectively has been identified by the CWDC as one of the seven standards for foster care (CWDC 2007). Good foster carers communicate well with children, young people and adults – verbally and in other ways too. It is through skilled communication that carers build relationships with children and young people who have had difficult experiences: where adults have been unworthy of their trust, and where they have neglected or abused them.

A good relationship with a caring adult is the basis from which a child develops and grows as a healthy, resilient individual. In some European countries when nurturing relationships involve people outside the child's family, such as foster carers or residential care workers, this is understood as 'social pedagogy'. There is no easy translation for the 'ogy' word. Some people describe it as the place where care and education meet: it's about taking responsibility for nurturing the well-being of the whole child – a feeling, thinking and physical being, with a life to be enjoyed now and a future to look forward to.

Head, hands and heart

The Institute of Education at the University of London has

done a lot of work in order to understand social pedagogy. People often describe it as 'doing what good parents do', but with a sense of responsibilities and understandings that go beyond those of being an ordinary parent. It is a way that foster carers can bring the whole of themselves to looking after the whole child: caring with their 'head, hands and heart', as social pedagogues would say. This approach can be summarised as follows.

Head

Thinking about the child and what they need; thinking about what you can do to help the child to flourish, both at an everyday level and when problems arise.

Hands

Dealing with all the practical matters of everyday life so that children can have fun, learn about the world (and make mistakes), and feel safe and cared for.

Heart

Making a relationship with the child, sharing their joy and wonder about the world, and being there when things go wrong and they are upset and angry. Foster carers need to be aware of what goes on in their own hearts and their own feelings, as well as be able to take a step back from their own concerns, so that their feelings don't interfere with the children's best interests.

For most foster carers these ideas make sense: social pedagogy gives us 'principles', a way of thinking about children and the adults in their lives that can be applied to fostering (Petrie and others 2006). These are:

- thinking of the child as a whole person, with material needs to be met, but also as a human being with feelings and thoughts of their own to be listened to
- accepting the rights of a child or young person to be heard on matters that concern them
- building an honest caring relationship with the child or young person so that they learn to trust their foster carer
- enjoying shared practical, creative and leisure activities together
- seeing all children and young people as worthy of respect as fellow human beings
- understanding that the foster carer is part of a team of adults who support the child or young person and their foster carer
- remembering that how we act and speak in everyday life is important – foster carers can be positive role models for children.

Social pedagogues also use theories that can be helpful for foster carers too. They include theories about:

- attachment – how from birth, children need trustworthy relationships and what happens when they feel let down by the people who are closest to them
- resilience – what can help children and young people to withstand difficult experiences and begin to 'bounce back'.

When children or young people do things that are hard to understand or are difficult to cope with, reflecting on these ideas and principles can help foster carers to understand and do things differently, rather than overreact to a particular situation or behaviour.

Special people doing ordinary things

One of the things that make foster carers special people doing ordinary things is the way that they bring children or young people they don't know into their home, to live alongside their children and family. The child or young person becomes a part of the foster carers family – where there may be different attitudes and perspectives on life. The way foster carers live alongside a child or young person and provide role models of nurturing and listening, parenting and care, is an important part of the foster carer's task. They are promoting the overall well-being of the child or young person, helping them to enjoy their childhood and grow towards a fulfilling adult life.

Social pedagogy is good at identifying what is special about caring for children or young people who are not your own. Social pedagogues often talk about being a person who is at the same time 'personal, professional and private'.

Foster carers:

- relate at a **personal** level with children and young people, and with children's services staff
- may not see themselves as **professional** carers but do take on responsibilities towards children and young people, and the agencies and local authorities they have an agreement with
- have a **private** life that they share, to some extent, with the children and young people they live with. Aspects of this sometimes become more public – because of the need for good, safe care practice.

All this means that foster carers are special people. It can be hard at times for foster carers to keep a clear boundary between private thoughts and feelings in front of a child or young person, but it may be very important to do so in order to provide good safe care. It is often partners, fellow carers and social workers, with whom foster carers have trusting personal relationships, who can help in these situations by providing a listening ear.

Good foster carers have all sorts of ways of getting to know the children and young people in their care.

A foster carer in Dudley explained that she used a singing toy dog as part of her children's 'getting ready for bed' routine, it helped new children to settle in and became a familiar bedtime game. Building familiar and playful ways of doing things together can help children feel safe and contained. Cups of steaming hot chocolate as a bedtime drink or shared silly songs can be simple and essential elements of childhood that a neglected child or young person has not experienced – and foster carers can provide them.

National Children's Bureau (NCB) has done lots of work with foster carers across the country. They have heard many of their hints and tips for playful and creative ways of helping children join in family life and develop warm and trusting relationships with their carers. See 'Foster care secrets' in *Carers Can!* magazines for hints and tips from experienced carers, view online or download for free – check the useful resources section on page 7.



Being creative together

Play and creative activities help social pedagogues get to know children. Sharing the enjoyment of doing things together – learning new skills, finding new aptitudes and talents – can be really good ways for foster carers and children and young people to get to know each other. This can be as simple as when a child or young person makes a family meal with a foster carer, or helps to build a garden pond or grow vegetables. At other times it can be a foster carer encouraging a child or young person to take part in a school play or choir – dashing around to get them to practices and turning up to applaud and cheer them because they are proud of what they have achieved. It may also be sitting and reading a book together, perhaps talking and disagreeing about the characters – Tracey Beaker's ways may not be yours!

NCB has worked with a number of organisations to help ensure that looked after children and young people have opportunities to do arts and creative activities. Sing Up – the national singing programme to encourage more children in schools to sing – invited NCB to develop a national partnership with them to find ways to include looked after children in their singing projects. Foster carers and children of primary school age were able to take part and enjoy singing as an ordinary leisure activity. NCB knew from earlier work that looked after children usually need extra encouragement to try something new, gain the confidence to try unfamiliar things, meet new people, and feel proud of the things they have achieved.

One of the things that Sing Up demonstrated, yet again, is that foster carers are *very important people* in the children and young people's lives. They are the people who can influence and enable a child or young person to participate positively in what's on offer locally. Foster carers, too, can be involved in the music-making or other creative activities; they too can learn new skills and meet new people.

Getting involved

Foster carers are very busy, so trying something different and unfamiliar can be hard to fit into an already packed and exhausting day. However, they often find themselves pleased and surprised at what they can do – and may even find they are helped and shown how by the children and young people themselves. This sometimes happened with Sing Up and other projects: the children and young people really enjoyed their foster carers being involved too. The reward for foster carers can be a sense of achievement, fun, relaxation and an opportunity to make new friends. Taking advantage of local opportunities, for their own and their foster children and young people, can be a different way of developing good and creative relationships with foster children and young people.

Foster carers involved in the Sing Up and NCB looked after children singing project talked about what they appreciated about taking part (Petrie and Knight 2011). The project used a social pedagogy approach:

I think it's been fantastic. I can't think of anything negative. I've been really impressed – it blew me away.

Foster carer

I enjoyed being in it myself, it brought me out of myself. It brings him [grandson] out of himself as well.

Kinship foster carer

The children seeing you outside of your comfort zone is helpful. Sharing your own vulnerability.

Foster carer

The adults learn as well as the children. Not like at school when they just teach us stuff. We do it together.

Looked after child

How to help children and young people to join in and have fun

Looked after children and young people may need extra support and encouragement to try new things, get involved in activities or maintain their interests. Here's some advice from experienced foster carers about how to help.



	How carers can help
Josie doesn't like doing things in groups – she's very shy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Take part in activities as a family so she feels more confident in learning how to get on in the larger group - Find small group activities that Josie can join - Find out if her friends go to any activities – maybe she can join them - Maybe there is a group at school that Josie could take part in – it could help her make friends at school too - Working towards an award might help – perhaps an arts award or awards from groups like guides and brownies – it would help Josie feel proud of her achievements and give a focus for doing things
Jamal never sticks at anything and gives up after a few weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jamal might find it easier to do 'taster sessions' and try something out first – it's hard to know if you'll like something if you haven't done it before - Talk to Jamal about what he likes and dislikes about the activities he's doing. Does he have a friend he could do an activity with? - Praise him for getting involved in things: encourage him to keep going; go along with him at the beginning, and use the time before and after to find out how he feels about it and how it went - Show an interest and talk about his achievements - Try doing things as a family – going on weekly swimming trips, having outings, spending an evening playing games – it may be easier for him if everyone else is involved and it will help him practise 'joining in'
Michael is quite aggressive with other children so they don't want to play with him	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Michael might benefit from activities that are more highly structured. Activities like scouts or joining a sports team might help as there are clear boundaries and lots of structure - Are there games you could play with him so he enjoys the activity but if he gets angry he can do so more safely, because you can contain his aggression? Also, he could get feedback about how he is behaving from you as someone who knows and accepts him as a person - Can you help him have a strategy for when he feels angry? This will help him manage situations when he is getting angry - Talk to activity group leaders about how they can help Michael learn to cope; he will need lots of praise when he isn't aggressive and clear boundaries and sanctions when he is - Would it help him to do some relaxing activities too – so he learns how to calm down? - And maybe help him to find something that will really let off steam – safely!
Calum only likes playing football and doesn't want to do anything else	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It's Calum's interest so do talk to him about it and encourage him to tell you what he is learning; go and watch him play, it's important to him - Ask teammates home for tea, so he gets to see them in other settings - He could join a football team or a junior supporters group – they often do other activities as well as football - Join the library and encourage Calum to borrow books about football, it will help his reading and he might try other books too - Remember that Calum is like many children and determined to explore his interest – for Calum it's football but it could equally be drumming, singing, dinosaurs or spaceships!
Jasmine is disabled, she needs support to do activities and someone who can manage her condition while she is there	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Talk to Jasmine's social worker about extra help to accompany her to the activities she enjoys; this needs to be a consistent person who knows her, can make a regular commitment and can manage her condition. This person might need training to do this - Talk to the activity leaders. Explain Jasmine's condition and any concerns you have about her taking part and how they can help. There are very few activities that can't accommodate a child with special needs - Are there any special activities locally for disabled children and young people where there is extra help and support to enable Jasmine to take part? - Are you eligible for special breaks? Ask the social worker - This could be a chance for Jasmine to have a different experience - Don't forget to talk with Jasmine about what she would really like to do – at home as well as outside activities

Thoughts from social workers

Here are some suggestions for ways of making sure children and young people's activities and interests are supported.

Plans

It is a good idea to make sure that children and young people's activities and interests are recorded in their care plans. This helps to make sure that they are encouraged to do them and that this continues even if they move.

Talk with the child or young people's social worker

Make sure they are aware of a child or young person's interests and activities.

Speak up at independent reviews

Encourage the child or young person to talk about their interests, activities and achievements in their independent review meeting. Independent reviewing officers will welcome this as it will help them understand more about the child or young person and is a good conversation starter.

Personal education plans (PEP)

They list all the help a child or young person needs to do well at school and this can include homework clubs or taking part in out-of-school activities. Many schools have a wide range of extended school activities such as sports, arts, extracurricular activities, holiday schemes and trips.

Encourage your child or young person to take part, and make sure his or her social worker has any necessary permission in place, for example for trips, before they are actually needed. Having a child or young person's creative activities recorded on the PEP – for example, playing a musical instrument or taking part in drama or dance – may help you to access extra resources for those activities.

Health plans should support well-being

They should state how the child or young person's health is going to be supported and this includes their emotional well-being as well as their physical health. All children and young people should be doing an hour of physical activity a day, this might be walking, playing, dancing, or sports – perhaps you might join them.

Expert guidance

National guidance for looked after children and foster care also strongly supports foster carers' efforts to develop good relationships with the children and young people they care for, and to encourage and support children and young people to enjoy all aspects of their lives.

Department of Health and Department of Children, Schools and Families (2009) Statutory Guidance on Promoting the Health and Wellbeing of Looked After Children states:

We want all looked after children to have kind, understanding and committed carers – whether foster carers or residential staff – and we want to encourage that element of 'stickability' which research has shown to be key to the successful continuation of relationships. The more engaged carers are in the child's life and the greater their role in decision-making, the more likely they are to develop that close bond which will lead to successful outcomes for the child.

See Practice Guidance page 70, paragraph 4.1, available at: http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_108501 (accessed March 2011)

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (2010) Promoting the Quality of Life of Looked-after Children and Young People recommends:

Encouraging warm and caring relationships between child and carer that nurture attachment and create a sense of belonging so that the child or young person feels safe, valued and protected.

Supporting the child or young person to participate in the wider network of peer, school and community activities to help build resilience and a sense of belonging.

See page 1 Principles and values, available at: <http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/13244/51175/51175.pdf> (accessed March 2011)

The **Foster Care Charter**, published in March 2011, sets out ten guiding principles for local authorities which, although not compulsory, are expected to be endorsed by local authorities. The principles include the following.

Children must be given every support to develop their own identities and aspirations, fulfil their potential, and take advantage of all opportunities to promote their talents and skills. Above all, they should be listened to.

Foster carers must provide positive adult role models, treat the foster child as they would their own child, and be a 'pushy parent' in advocating for all aspects of the child's development, including educational attainment and physical and emotional health and well-being, and cooperate fully as part of a team with other key professionals in the child's life.

Foster carers must support their foster child and do all they can to make the placement work. Take part in learning and development, use skills and approaches that make a positive impact and enable the child to reach his or her potential. Support their foster child to help them to counter possible bullying and discrimination as a result of their care status.

The principles are not compulsory for local authorities but it is hoped that all local authorities will endorse them.

Available at:

<http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/f/the%20foster%20carers%20charter.pdf> (accessed March 2011)



References

Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC)(2007) *Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things: The training, support and development standards for foster care – A guide for foster carers.*

http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/assets/0000/0602/CWDC_Guide_for_Foster_Carers_0507.pdf (accessed March 2011)

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (2010) *Promoting the Quality of Life of Looked-after Children and Young People.* London: NICE.

<http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/13244/51175/51175.pdf> (accessed March 2011)

Petrie P and Knight A (2011) *I Want to Sing: An evaluation of the Sing Up NCB programme with looked after children.* London: Sing Up.

Petrie and others (2006) *Working with Children in Care: European perspectives.* Bucks: Open University Press.

Useful resources

Carers Can!

A range of magazines for foster carers that cover the importance of play and creative activities for looked after children and young people, for example singing. Includes informative articles about how to build resilience, strengthen attachment and help children join in; as well ideas for practical things to do at home. Also has advice and tips from experienced foster carers. Others in the series are:

Carers Can! Foster health

Carers Can! Foster play (with information about places to play in the West Midlands)

Carers Can! Foster singing

Carers Can! Play

Download from: http://www.ncb.org.uk/healthycare/resources/for_foster_carers.aspx (accessed March 2011)

Petrie, P (2011) *Communication Skills for Working with Children and Young People: Introducing social pedagogy*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

This practical guide identifies the child and their relationship with the adult as the basis upon which real communication can be made. Topics covered include non-verbal communication; attentive listening; empathy; the part played by questions; working constructively with conflict and criticism; and communicating in groups. It also draws on the innovative ideas found in social pedagogic theory and practice, such as: communicating with your head, hands and heart; and how to differentiate between the personal, the professional and the private in your interactions. The book contains exercises, topics for personal reflection or group discussion, and suggestions for observations.

Ryan, M (2006) *Understanding Why: Understanding attachment and how this can affect education, with special reference to adopted children and young people and those looked after by local authorities*. London: NCB.

Newman, T and Blackburn, S (2002) *Transitions in the Lives of Children and Young People: Resilience factors*. Interchange No 78. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Education Department.

A discussion of what research on resilience factors has found.

<http://www.barnardos.org.uk/ic78.pdf> (accessed March 2011)

Scholfield, G (2006) 'Providing a secure base for troubled children: The role of attachment', in *Be My Parent* magazine. London: British Association of Adoption and Fostering.

A straightforward discussion of attachment issues for looked after and adopted children.

<http://www.bemyparent.org.uk/features/providing-a-secure-base-for-troubled-children-the-role-of-attachment,66,AR.html> (accessed March 2011)

Websites

British Association of Adoption and Fostering – advice, resources and support for foster care and adoption
www.baaf.org.uk

The Fostering Network – advice, information and resources for all with a personal or professional interest in fostering
www.fostering.net

Healthy Care – resources for foster carers and others concerned with the health of looked after children and young people
www.ncb.org.uk/healthycare

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Written by Helen Chambers, Associate of Centre for Understanding Social Pedagogy and Professor Pat Petrie, Centre for Understanding Social Pedagogy, Institute of Education, University of London

Edited by Mary Ryan



Leading education
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Institute of Education
University of London



National Children's Bureau
8 Wakley Street
London EC1V 7QE

tel +44 (0)20 7843 6000
fax +44 (0)20 7278 9512

Registered Charity Number 258825

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