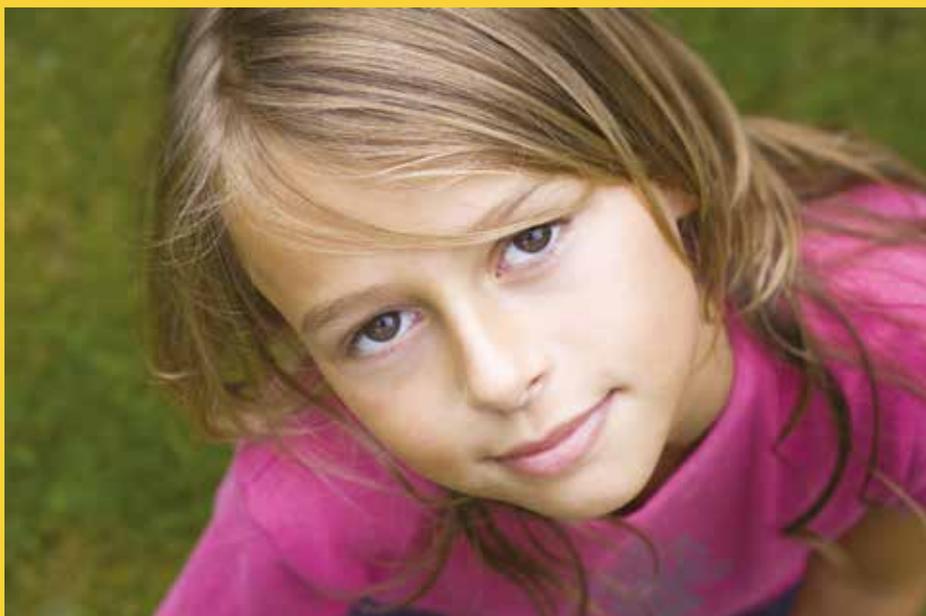


# How are foster carers selected?

## An international literature review of instruments used within foster carer selection

by Nikki Luke and Judy Sebba





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# Executive Summary



How do we select good foster carers? Selecting the most suitable people is crucial for placement quality and stability but is a complex process. Consequently, fostering service providers and researchers have designed instruments that can be used during the selection process but these can only ever constitute a part of the overall procedure.

They are used to assess the personal characteristics and circumstances and the potential of those applying to become effective foster carers. Usually, strengths and competencies are cross-checked through a range of procedures including using such an instrument, interviews, references and documentary checks. The ultimate aim is to assist in the prediction of longer-term effective placements though more realistically these measures might be expected to identify each carer's future needs for training and support. Before adopting any of these instruments, providers need to know that they have been properly validated against placement outcomes to determine a reliable measure of success.

This review of the international research was undertaken in order to identify the instruments used by fostering service providers as part of the selection and approval process for new foster carers. The focus was on the instruments that have been designed to help providers select 'good' carers, rather than the pre-service assessment and training process as a whole. The review was designed to assess the usefulness of current selection instruments, by examining the available evidence of their validation against placement outcomes. The main review questions were:

- What are the instruments that are currently used to aid public, private and third sector foster care providers with the selection and approval of new foster carers?
- How much evidence is there of the validity of these instruments insofar as they contribute to predicting successful foster placements?

Electronic databases and websites were used to identify 25 studies, reports and templates from the UK, North America, Europe and Australasia. All documents published since 2000, that included details of selection instruments for foster care applicants, were included. Older studies were also included where these were frequently cited. Documents were not excluded on the basis of methodology, nor on the authors' chosen measure of placement 'success' (e.g. placement stability, length of time as a foster carer).

The evidence on available instruments and their role in the selection process was limited, and particular shortcomings were noted in the capacity of the publications to address the second review question about validity. Most of the selection instruments that had undergone validity testing have been tested with existing foster carers rather than new applicants, and often the samples employed were too small to allow a robust statistical analysis. Crucially, the review identifies a lack of research linking the characteristics and competencies of new foster care applicants to later measures of success.

## Key Findings

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The review revealed a number of key themes in the literature on the measures available to assess new foster care applicants. The research base in this field is very limited. However, at present the balance of evidence and informed professional opinion suggests that there is:

- A potential role for selection instruments to improve the selection of foster carers provided they are not used as the sole basis to accept or reject an applicant. A variety of sources of information should be used to cross-check profiles of carers within a broader process of approval.
- Additional potential for selection instruments to be used in identifying strengths and areas in which foster carer applicants are likely to need training and support in the future.
- A limitation in the validity of the instruments to 'predict the future' by linking the characteristics and competencies of new foster care applicants to later measures of success. The inability to compare instruments in terms of their predictive power is partly due to insufficient collection of data from foster care applicants rather than established carers. In addition, many studies failed to test the predictive power of selection instruments by measuring their relationship to child safety, ability to achieve permanency, placement stability, carer retention, child well-being or other desired outcomes.
- Potential bias from inadequately trained interviewers that might affect applicants' responses and thereby invalidate the findings.
- A need to recognise the importance of the on-going relationship between applicant and agency in developing and strengthening skills and competencies in fostering. The selection instrument needs to be presented in a way that makes clear its role in this longer-term process.
- The possibility for transfer across countries of instruments for selection. Whereas some 'desirable' foster carer attributes such as empathy for children, nurturing qualities and flexibility are likely to be equally applicable across countries, the cultural values reflected in the tool itself or in the process of selection within which it is embedded might create problems.



## Recommendations for policy and practice

Given the limited evidence available on the role and predictive power of the selection instruments reviewed here, recommendations for policy, practice and further research draw on the reasoned reflections of experienced practitioners and researchers on the literature in this review. Recommendations for policy and practice include:

- Begin any development or revision of an instrument designed to assess foster carer applicants by thinking carefully about the core outcomes being sought (for example, child safety, legal and emotional permanency and child well-being), and how the foster carer can contribute to those outcomes.
- Consider expanding selection instruments to address additional important attributes. Asking children and young people with foster care experience to identify desirable characteristics in foster carers could also increase the relevance of selection instruments, provided they translate into successful placements.
- Instruments for selecting or rejecting applicants to fostering may appear to be cost-effective but the temptation to use them in isolation should be resisted. Recognition that instruments are only part of the process and that the developing and strengthening of skills and competencies is an important aim interacting with selection, service providers should direct their limited resources across the on-going relationship between applicant and agency.

- Fostering service providers should ensure that assessors using selection instruments as part of a wider process are thoroughly trained in collecting and analysing information from a range of sources including selection instruments, observation of carer applicants in orientation/training sessions and interviews and observations undertaken in the carer home, conducted sensitively in a way that reduces bias.
- Fostering service providers should adopt more flexible and open approaches to selection in order to reduce bias against specific groups. The use of standardised selection instruments may have a role within the process in doing this. In applying instruments, use should be made of local community knowledge to address cultural issues. For example, poverty should not be conflated with lack of capacity to provide good quality care. In addition, assessors should neither over-emphasise nor ignore the circumstances and strengths of single and LGBT applicants.
- Countries developing their fostering services should consider the utility of adapting selection instruments to suit local cultural values while acknowledging that adaptations potentially reduce any established validity until the modified instrument has been tested with that population.



## Recommendations for further research

The review has revealed a lack of studies employing prospective designs that use selection instruments to predict later child and placement outcomes. Future studies are needed that:

- Are prospective, involving a sample of foster care applicants in testing the selection and approval instruments.
- Follow up these applicants for a reasonable period of time using clear outcome measures such as child safety from abuse or neglect, placement stability, duration of fostering experience, or most importantly child measures such as achievement of permanency and other benefits experienced by the children fostered.
- Use appropriate designs and samples that are large enough to make robust claims about findings.
- Explore the potential role of the perspectives of the child or young person in terms of what they look for that might be predictors of future success.

# Background

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Providers of foster care (public, private and third sector organisations) have an obligation to ensure that the carers they engage are skilled, confident and resilient to offer the children in their care a safe, stable and nurturing home environment. A combination of legal care being the responsibility of the state, and the frequently complex needs of children entering care, means that more is often expected of foster families than of birth families (Buehler et al., 2006b). But how can fostering service providers ensure that they end up with 'good' carers?

Much has been written about the relationship between foster carer characteristics and 'successful' placements. For example, Sinclair et al.'s (2005) large-scale survey of carers, social workers and family placement workers showed that placement success (as rated by all three parties) was positively related to the carer's involvement in doing things with the child, as well as to a composite measure of positive parenting (ratings of caring, accepting, clear expectations, not being upset by the child's failure to respond, seeing things from the child's viewpoint and encouraging). Success was negatively related to a composite measure of rejection (lack of fondness, inability to tolerate child, mixed reactions from self and partner and apathy towards understanding the child's behaviour or explaining their own reactions to it). In addition, involvement with the child was related to fewer placement disruptions, while rejection predicted more disruptions. Outlining which characteristics are likely to predict more or less successful placement outcomes in this way should make it easier for fostering service providers to ensure that they are employing good carers.

Potentially at least, helping foster carers to develop these characteristics once they are in the role can be achieved through the use of on-going assessments and training; at this stage providers can also decide what to do with carers who fail to develop desirable skills and attitudes. The detailed assessment that service providers make of all new fostering applicants provides a key opportunity for determining the likelihood that a particular applicant will make a successful foster carer. In this review, we focus on the instruments that service providers and researchers have developed to assist with the process of selecting and approving new carers.

In order to evaluate these instruments we need a more precise account of what the assessment process is intended to achieve. Buehler et al. (2006a) recommend that a good approval process should help the provider to:

- train applicants to develop competence and commitment;
- support the applicant in examining their capacities to foster children;
- systematically collect statutory information;
- identify those who can provide 'good', stable care and those who are less suited for the role of foster carer;
- identify support and training needs; and
- collect relevant information for use in placement matching and foster carer support.

According to Dickerson and Allen (2006, p.77), investigations should provide:

*...an in-depth psychosocial analysis of a foster... applicant's potential as a parent, complete with a detailed look at a series of interrelated social and emotional variables that have shaped the individual from childhood to the present.*

How can these investigations best be conducted? Kennedy and Thorpe (2006) suggested that the process could draw on principles from personnel psychology, which aim to optimise the fit between an individual, their role and the organisation. The authors argued that the use of a standardised personality test could help to identify relevant personal attributes and use these to predict successful outcomes. They suggest that profiles generated by such tests could be used to reject candidates whose scores indicate extreme deviance from the typical 'caregiving' profile in terms of the core areas of personality that are found to predict fostering success.

Standardised assessment helps to identify which are the characteristics of foster care applicants that predict placement stability; it also allows service providers to identify likely support needs during placements.

This report covers a number of tests that have been designed to be used in this way. Buehler et al. (2006a) note that standardised instruments can give a useful assessment of applicants' potential to become foster carers, which can be used alongside professional judgment. These authors claim standardised instruments can help workers to target training and support to new applicants and existing carers, and provide an on-going record that is useful in a context where staff turnover is often high. Moreover, these instruments can be used to help in judgments about matching carers with children. Standardised instruments offer a more objective and less biased approach to professional judgment (Rhodes et al., 2006).

Questionnaires to be used in the selection of new foster carers have traditionally been developed retrospectively, that is, by thinking about what are the 'desirable' characteristics in a foster carer. A logical starting-point would be to create a measure of the characteristics that have already been shown statistically to predict placement success, such as those identified by Sinclair et al. (2005). Yet to our knowledge, this approach has not yet been taken. Instead, those developing questionnaires have, in general, chosen to identify desirable characteristics based on national and local standards for foster care and the opinions of experienced practitioners.

The identification of desirable characteristics has been used in the design of questionnaires, but also in developing alternative methods to measure the potential for becoming a successful foster carer. Measures such as evidence-gathering instruments and home study interviews (in which social workers undertake home visits for assessment purposes – these are not covered by this review) also assess applicants in relation to predetermined desirable characteristics. Ideally, the competencies identified in all of these methods can act as a framework for the support and development of carers, rather than a set of criteria in which all applicants must be fully skilled at the time of applying.

# Guidelines on the selection of foster carers

In the United Kingdom, similar but separate regulations govern the standards of foster care in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In general, applications are presented to a local panel of individuals with knowledge and experience of foster care and related services; often these panels will include experienced foster carers and adults who have experience of living in foster care. In England, fostering panels have a legal function to make recommendations about applicants regarding their approval as foster carers. As part of this process, the panel must be provided with an assessment report on each applicant.

For many service providers, this takes the format of an evidence-based form, in which applicants are asked to provide evidence of the skills and experience they will bring to the role. Generally, providers ask for evidence of competence in caring for children, providing a safe and caring environment, working as part of a team and their personal development. National Minimum Standards state that the assessment process must make clear to applicants the competencies that the provider is looking for (Department for Education, 2011). The forms used by many providers cover a similar range of issues, including: child rearing; caring for children born to someone else; contact between fostered children and their families; helping children make sense of their past; sexual boundaries and attitudes; awareness of issues around child abuse; approaches to discipline; awareness of how to promote secure attachments between children and appropriate adults; awareness of own motivation for fostering/own needs to be met through the fostering process; religion; ethnicity/cultural/linguistic issues; standard of living and lifestyle; health; own experience of parenting and being parented; own experiences in relation to disability and/or attitudes to disability (Borthwick and Lord, 2011). The report should outline which of these are areas of strength for the applicant and which need further development. Borthwick and Lord (2011) suggest that specific issues for panel members to consider in making their decisions include the wishes of any existing children in the applicants' family, divorce or previously failed partnerships and the applicants' use of discipline.



Selection instruments which tap into these and other identified areas can therefore form part of this overall report. Similarly, constructs such as Schofield and Beek's (2005) Secure Base Model can be used as a framework when assessing applicants' competencies (University of East Anglia, 2012).

Lee (2001) reviewed the laws of all US states to determine whether there was a standardised set of criteria for selecting and approving foster carers. The review revealed a wide range of policies and legislations practised by the different states and imposed variously at the state, county, or agency level. Of the 33 states with direct laws on fostering, most had requirements relating to age, health and criminal background, with two-thirds of states specifying exclusion criteria; yet 21% of these states had no specific requirements for a check on applicants' home environment. Lee sets out a composite list of the most stringent regulations drawn from across the states, including specifications on applicants' age, living arrangements and health status; notably, these do not include the need to question applicants on their motivations or attitudes towards fostering and foster children. A more recent publication by the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011) indicates that there is still considerable variation between the states in their standards and requirements for the selection and approval of foster carers; while all states require some sort of assessment or home study to be conducted, there is no standardised format for this.

Given the lack of uniformity in approaches to selecting foster carers, Dickerson and Allen's (2006) guide is designed to help practitioners to screen foster care applicants. The authors recommend that home study visits should cover family history, education and employment history, marital (or significant other) relationships, experience with children, attitudes towards fostering and health and that references should be taken up. This information should all be collected by way of separate interviews with spouses/partners, as well as a joint interview that would allow the assessor to observe the interactions between partners. In addition, Dickerson and Allen suggest that engaging a consulting psychologist can be helpful when decisions are difficult; psychologists can apply particular tests for depression and anxiety, psychopathologies, cognitive functions, personal or family conflicts, or parenting skills, to help with the decision-making process. However, the authors note that none of these has been tested as predictors of successful foster placements.

Outside of the UK and the USA, there is further variation in the guidelines for selecting new foster carers. Differences between and within countries in the context of fostering can dictate the focus of the selection process, making the development of a global, standardised selection tool an unrealistic aim. Instead, fostering service providers need to be made aware of the variety of potential measures that are available to aid their assessment of foster care applicants, and the extent to which these have been tested in predicting successful placement outcomes.

## Aims and scope

This review of the international research addresses the issue of foster care selection and approval. It was undertaken in order to identify the instruments used by fostering service providers within the selection and approval process for new foster carers and examine evidence of their validation. The main review questions were:

- What are the instruments that are currently used to aid public, private and third sector foster care providers with the selection and approval of new foster carers?
- How much evidence is there of the validity of these instruments insofar as they contribute to predicting successful foster placements?

These questions focus on a particular aspect of the assessment and selection process, in order to determine the value of the instruments that are available to foster care providers in selecting future foster carers. It fits within – but does not extend to – a broader examination of the selection process, which should also include questions on the role of assessment, the type of information that should be gathered and the ways in which this should be analysed. Further work is needed to determine the value of these aspects of the selection process in relation to the instruments discussed here.

The review does not cover the range of materials used to inform applicants about fostering and develop their skills during pre-service preparation and training courses; nor does it address the topic of measures used to assess foster carers after the point of approval. Instead, it covers any instruments available for use by service providers to assist in the selection process from initial recruitment up to the point of approval (the decision to allow applicants to care for children) and reported in published form (in journals, books or online).

## Methodology

This review synthesises the findings from the international literature on measures to assist in foster carer selection. It includes research, reports and assessment templates that have been produced in the UK, North America, Europe and Australasia. A number of electronic databases were searched, including ERIC, PsycInfo, ASSIA, SCOPUS, Social Policy and Practice, Social Services Abstracts and the Social Sciences Citation Index. In addition, the websites of key childhood research institutions including British Association for Adoption and Fostering, The Fostering Network, Social Care Institute for Excellence, Chapin Hall and Casey Family Programs were searched for relevant publications.

Our search incorporated varied international terminology for foster care including ‘foster care’, ‘foster parent’, ‘substitute care’ and ‘out-of-home care’, as well as the key terms ‘assess\*’, ‘select\*’, ‘approv\*’, ‘recruit\*’, ‘potential’, ‘regist\*’, ‘screen\*’ and ‘licen\*’. We restricted our search to publications from 2000 onwards (though included any highly cited studies from the previous 30 years) and references (if present) were screened for relevance. All publications that presented selection and approval measures for foster care applicants and which used a range of methodologies, from questionnaires to evidence-gathering approaches, were included. Finally, given that some service providers develop their own instruments that are not written about in research reports, we contacted an international panel of foster care experts for advice on alternative measures that might not be revealed by our literature search. We acknowledge the likelihood that further measures not identified by our search strategy exist internationally; the presumed existence of these unrevealed measures adds weight to the argument we make in this report.

From the searching process, and from the references in studies identified, 25 journal articles, reports and templates were identified. Nineteen of the publications reported on the use of questionnaires about desirable characteristics to be completed by applicants or assessors (e.g. Buehler et al., 2006a; Orme et al., 2006d; Touliatos and Lindholm, 1981). A further three presented evidence-gathering instruments to help service providers assess the strengths and development

needs of foster care applicants (e.g. BAAF, 2008). Finally, three publications outlined supplementary measures that could be used flexibly alongside more standard instruments in order to provide the fullest possible picture of an applicant’s potential for success (e.g. Cousins, 2010).

Of the 25 publications included in this review, only 11 provided a statistical analysis of the links between the characteristics they measured and foster care placement outcomes, and these were limited to testing three measures (Casey Foster Applicant Inventory, e.g. Orme et al., 2006d; Casey Home Assessment Protocol, e.g. Orme et al., 2006c; predictors of success for new foster parents, Cautley and Aldridge, 1975). Only one (Cautley and Aldridge, 1975) applied the assessment measure during the initial selection process and used it to predict later placement outcomes; the rest tested the assessment measure with existing carers and measured placement outcomes concurrently (e.g. Cuddeback et al., 2007; Orme et al., 2006d). The remainder of the publications in the review simply presented their selection measures with no information on tests of their ability to predict placement success.

## Status of the publications

Where foster carer selection instruments have been tested, the research is quantitative in nature and involves tests of scale reliability and/or validity. The publications in this review were produced in the following countries:

USA	16
UK	5
Sweden	2
Australia	1
Portugal	1

Details of the publications can be found in Table 1 in Appendix B.

# Key Findings

**What are the instruments that are currently used to aid public, private and third sector foster care providers with the selection and approval of new foster carers?**

**How much evidence is there of the validity of these instruments insofar as they contribute to predicting successful foster placements?**

## Questionnaires

### Casey Family Programs measures

Casey Family Programs – a major US provider of foster care and child welfare services – has published the Casey Foster Family Assessments (CFFA). The CFFA consists of the Casey Foster Applicant Inventory (CFAI; Buehler et al., 2006a) and the Casey Home Assessment Protocol (CHAP; Rhodes et al., 2006). Both were designed by Casey Family Programs in collaboration with the University of Tennessee Family Foster Care Project. CFAI and CHAP are free to use without permission, but are subject to copyright, meaning that items cannot be modified.

The purpose of the CFAI and CHAP is to identify the applicant's strengths as well as their training and support needs. The measures are completed around two-thirds of the way through the selection process, to ensure that applicants have some knowledge of what fostering involves. Where there are two applicants (spouses or partners), measures are completed separately with each person.

### Casey Foster Applicant Inventory (CFAI)

The Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Applicant version (CFAI-A; Buehler et al., 2006a) is a self-report questionnaire. The questionnaire is based on the 12 competencies for fostering identified by Buehler et al. (2006b): providing a safe and secure environment, providing a nurturing environment, promoting educational attainment and success, meeting physical and mental healthcare needs, promoting social and emotional development, supporting diversity and children's cultural needs, supporting permanency planning, managing ambiguity and loss for the foster child and family, growing as a foster parent, managing the demands of fostering on personal and familial well-being, supporting relationships between children and their families and working as a team member. Items for the CFAI were based on interviews conducted with experienced foster carers and kinship carers, a review of research literature and existing measures, and professional standards (Orme et al., 2006d).

Development of the CFAI builds on the earlier Foster Parent Potential Scale, a 76-item worker-report measure produced by the same research group (Orme et al., 2003). It adds specific items for married/partnered applicants, those with birth/adopted children and those offering kinship care. It also addresses the need to include items suggested by interviews with foster carers and the content of carers' training programmes. Moreover, it offers a more comprehensive assessment by being designed as a self-report to complement the information gained by social workers.

The original version of the CFAI-A included 185 items across six subscales; statistical analyses saw this total reduced to 74 items (Orme et al., 2006d). Higher scores on each subscale indicate greater potential of the foster carer to display those competencies.

The first three subscales are completed by all applicants:

- potential to promote foster child development (Foster Child Development);
- potential to foster challenging children (Challenging Children); and
- potential to contend with challenging relationships with foster care workers and agencies (Worker/Agency Challenges).

The other three subscales apply only to special groups of applicants:

- potential of two-parent couples to parent foster children together (Coparenting);
- potential to integrate a foster child into a family with birth or adopted children (Integrating Foster Children); and
- potential to provide care to a child of a relative (Kinship Care).



Orme et al. (2006d) and Orme et al. (2007) report the results of a field study used to validate the CFAI-A with 304 licensed foster carers (i.e. not new applicants). Analyses of data for the 111 male-female couples within this sample are also reported separately in Orme et al. (2006a). Details of the statistical analysis are presented in Appendix A. Overall the analyses supported the six proposed subscales. Comparisons between carers' scores on the six CFAI-A subscales and concurrent demographic characteristics, self-reported fostering outcomes and scores from a second new measure, the Casey Home Assessment Protocol (described below) supported the measure's ability to predict conceptually similar outcomes (Orme et al., 2006d). For example, greater potential to handle Challenging Children predicted having spent more years fostering and having had more placements. The stability of foster placements was not measured, and there were some problems with the reported analyses, which are discussed in Appendix A. A further issue relates to our more general criticism of the literature in this field, in that the questionnaire was designed for use with new applicants but was tested on existing carers, making any claims about the ability to predict placement outcomes from applicant characteristics problematic.

An update to this study reported the online use of the CFAI-A by 610 individuals (Orme, 2007a), with generally similar results as reported in Appendix A. However, there were significant differences in the mean scores of participants in the online study compared to those in the original study. Whilst participants in the original study were exclusively established carers, this later study was intended to target new applicants but failed to make that clear on the online form, making it difficult to determine whether the findings reflected the characteristics of new applicants. Moreover, the analysis in this report did not include linking scores on the CFAI-A subscales to any placement outcomes, again compromising any claims about the measure's predictive capability.

There is also a version of the CFAI for workers to complete (CFAI-W; Buehler et al., 2006a). Orme et al. (2006d) and Cuddeback et al. (2007) report on a study with 208 workers completing the CFAI-W for 416 foster homes (some couples, some singles – a total of 712 individuals). Workers in this study were asked to complete the measure once for their *best* foster family (in the worker's opinion) and once for the *worst*. As might be expected, the best families scored more positively than the worst. The manual provides details on normative scores for licensed foster carers in the USA.

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Statistical analyses suggested that the workers' version had one core subscale for all applicants (General Potential), rather than the three found in the CFAI-A; further analyses supported the same three specialist subscales as the applicant version (Coparenting, Integrating Foster Children and Kinship Care). Higher scores on General Potential, Coparenting and Integrating Foster Children were all linked to licensure status of carers, as well as the likelihood of having a current placement. While the study had many positive features, there were some limitations in the data analyses, which are covered in Appendix A. In addition, placement stability was not measured.

An update to these studies was provided from the online use of the CFAI-W by workers for 177 female and 88 male applicants for foster care (Orme, 2007b); in this study, therefore, there was no direction to complete measures for best and worst existing carers. Appendix A outlines the ways in which this set of analyses produced different results from the original study. This was the first test of the CFAI with a group of new applicants rather than existing carers. However, placement outcomes were not reported for this sample; they had not yet been followed up into their fostering roles, and it was unclear whether there were plans to do so.

Orme (2007b) noted some difficulties with the online completion of the CFAI-W: namely, that workers were only identifiable by their email addresses (so that multiple entries could only be detected if the same email address was supplied), and that the system did not have a clear process for identifying applicants in order to link up CFAI-A and CFAI-W scores or the CFAI-W scores for couples. Also, workers were not asked whether applicants were couples or seeking to be kinship carers, or whether they had their own children, making it difficult to determine why data for the Coparenting, Kinship Care and Integrating Foster Children subscales were missing.

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## Casey Home Assessment Protocol (CHAP)

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The CHAP was designed to be used alongside the CFAI and consists of two parts: a range of self-report questionnaires for applicants and the Fostering Challenge interview, conducted by the assessor (Rhodes et al., 2006). Fostering providers can select whether to use the whole set of measures or those which are most relevant to their clients.



The first part of the CHAP includes a number of measures, designed to assess:

Reasons for fostering;

- Reasons for Fostering inventory (RF) <sup>a</sup>

Family history;

- Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI)

Physical and mental health;

- Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depressed Mood (CES-D)
- Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)
- Short Hardiness Scale (SHS)
- Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS)

Family functioning;

- Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS)
- Overt Interparental Hostility Scale (OIH)

Parenting style;

- Kansas Parenting Satisfaction Scale (KPS)
- Parental Acceptance Scale (PAS)

Family resources;

- Available Time Scale (ATS) <sup>a</sup>

Social support;

- Help with Fostering Inventory (HFI) <sup>a</sup>

Cultural competency;

- Cultural Competency Scale (CCS)
- Cultural Receptivity in Fostering Scale (CRFS) <sup>a</sup>

Fostering readiness;

- Foster Parent Role Performance Scale (FPRP)
- Willingness to Foster Scale (WFS) <sup>a</sup>
- Personal Dedication to Fostering Scale (PDFS) <sup>a</sup>
- Receptivity to Birth Family Connections Scale (RBFCS) <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Indicates questionnaires that were developed specifically for this measure.

The technical manual (Orme et al., 2006c) includes a number of other scales that were omitted from the final version, either due to poor statistical results or because the authors could not obtain copyright permissions to use them. The manual also provides details on normative scores on the self-report items for licensed foster carers in the USA.

The same sample of 304 existing carers who were used to test the CFAI-A also trialled the CHAP; their results are reported in detail by Orme et al. (2006c) and in separate papers on the Available Time Scale by Cherry et al. (2009), the Help with Fostering Inventory by Orme et al. (2006b), the Cultural Receptivity in Fostering Scale by Coakley and Orme (2006) and the Willingness to Foster Scale by Orme et al. (2013). Details of the statistical analyses are covered in Appendix A. Several of the scales included in the first part of CHAP showed links with measures of foster care 'success' such as greater intention to continue fostering and more fostering experience (years spent as a carer and number of placements).

The second part of the CHAP involves choosing at random one of three Fostering Challenges interviews, each of which contains six situational vignettes designed to assess applicants' abilities to deal with the unique challenges of fostering. The vignettes use common dilemmas faced by foster carers, such as the difficulty of saying goodbye to a child to whom one has formed an attachment. Answers are scored from 'excellent' to 'poor', with guidelines on rating provided. A seventh vignette, which is the same for all three interviews, is only given to applicants with partners/spouses. More positive scores on this part of the CHAP predicted having fostered for a longer period of time and fewer requests to have children removed.

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## Swedish questionnaires

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Inspired by the Casey Foster Family Assessments, the National Board of the Institute for the Development of Methods in Social Work in Sweden has been working to develop a questionnaire for use in the screening of foster care applicants. In an initial report (Socialstyrelsen, 2011), the Board presented a self-report questionnaire for completion by applicants, which was designed to collect information about: applicant's background; problem areas – such as health, drug/alcohol abuse, and criminality; motivations for becoming a foster carer; parenting strategies; and attitudes towards foster care. 146 existing foster carers completed the questionnaire once and then again two weeks later, to check the reliability of the questions; there was a satisfactory level of agreement between their answers at the two time points. Predictive validity of the measure (the extent to which a score on a scale or test predicts some criterion measure, in this case placement stability for example) was not tested.

In a later report (Socialstyrelsen, 2012), the Board presented a measure for the selection of foster homes, which was developed in cooperation with reference groups of practitioners and researchers. The measure includes a questionnaire, as well as an interview with vignettes describing typical situations that might occur in foster care; the vignettes were drawn from the CHAP, translated into Swedish and adapted to the Swedish context. The measure is primarily designed to focus on the risks in order to identify families that may be assessed as unfit to foster. Although positive feedback from foster carers and social workers is reported, the Board does not give information on the validity or reliability of this measure.



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## Earlier scales

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The Casey Foster Family Assessments – and in particular the CFAI – built on earlier scales developed in the USA. Although the CFFA developers and others have cited these earlier scales, it is not clear whether the scales were actually adopted by service providers. Two of the most widely-cited examples are discussed here.

Touliatos and Lindholm (1981) created a 'measurement of potential for foster parenthood'. Items for this measure were developed from professional standards (the updated version of which formed part of the source materials for the Casey measures), and used characteristics described as important for distinguishing 'suitable' from 'unsuitable' foster carers. Social workers filled in the measure for 472 existing foster families with recent placements.

Statistical analysis suggested that the measure was formed of 9 subscales, which were similar for men and women. The subscales, which described desirable characteristics, were: physical health; employment and income; available time; enhancement of child's cultural and intellectual development; also of child's religious and spiritual development; marriage and responsibility (including emotional stability and reputable character); ability and motivation (including past relations with children, caring, continuity of care, values, motivation and potential enjoyment, getting along with others and having no problems in sexual identification); flexibility towards children's needs, expectations of children and use of help; and cooperative working with the agency and the birth family. However, there was no analysis to show whether or not higher scores on the scale indicated greater placement success, and issues with the analysis are reported in Appendix A.

Like Touliatos and Lindholm (1981), Cautley and Aldridge (1975) set out specifically to examine the characteristics of applicants that predicted placement success; however, they did not rely solely on social workers' judgements. The authors interviewed 963 applicants at an early stage in the home study process, and followed up the 145 couples who were accepted to foster 6- to 12-year-olds, until 18 months later (or the duration of their first placement, if this was shorter).

They also interviewed social workers about the couples' first placement (though this focused on the mothers as social workers felt they were not familiar enough with the fathers).

Placement success was measured in several ways: social workers rated how well the foster mother was 'fulfilling her task' and gave an overall rating of the foster carers' effectiveness in handling the child's problems; in addition, the follow-up interviews with applicants were analysed to produce ratings of success, which incorporated an evaluation of how much they helped the child with their specific needs, their sensitivity to the child's feelings, how 'child-centred' they were and having a thoughtful approach to the child.

Applicants were asked why they inquired about fostering, the challenges they anticipated in the role, their spouse's attitude to fostering, the good and bad points about their own children, their own family background, the family's approach to decision-making, and their attitudes towards social workers and the potential foster child's birth family. They also responded to vignettes about foster children's behaviour and descriptions of defiant, withdrawn, careless and slow children.

Taken separately, none of these predicted placement success; so the authors examined the predictive power of 'clusters' of characteristics (full details of which are given in Appendix A). A summary of these 'predictive' characteristics picks out as themes: the applicants' degree of familiarity with childcare; the father's perceptions of his own parents; each applicant's perceptions of family decision-making (for fathers perceived joint decision-making was important, while for mothers it was the perception that their husband had more influence); appropriate handling of difficult child behaviours, including understanding underlying reasons and avoiding harsh punishment; father's openness to social worker visits and advice; father's experience of change as a result of his experiences with children and his self-awareness; father's concern for the foster child over his own convenience; and mother's treatment of her own or others' children as individuals. Cautley and Aldridge argued that agencies should assess all of these characteristics, given the limited predictive value of individual items.

## Evidence-gathering instruments

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) has developed the Prospective Foster Carer/s Report ('Form F'; BAAF, 2008). This is the standard tool used by social workers in creating assessment reports for those applying to be foster carers in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Although different versions of the form exist to reflect the variations in fostering regulations across the constituent countries of the UK, the format is largely the same. The form is divided into six sections, covering: (A) factual information on the applicants; (B) foster carer potential; (C) supplementary information; (D) references and statutory checks; (E) a table of competencies; and (F) personal professional development plan. The evidence gathered for Form F is based on a combination of statutory requirements (e.g. criminal records checks) and competencies expected of a 'successful' carer.

The extensive Section B (Chapman, 2009) uses a broad range of open-ended questions to investigate the experiences that have shaped the individual applicant, and their ability to fulfil the foster carer's role successfully. This section is used to gather information on: individual profile and family and environmental factors (e.g. by asking applicants to compile a family tree and talk about their own relationships with parents and significant others, as well as their identity, education, employment, health and leisure interests); present circumstances (questions on current partner and household, social network, accommodation, community and financial circumstances); and parenting and foster carer capacity (investigating applicants' motivation, previous applications, experience caring for children, expectations about fostering, attitudes to diversity, current lifestyle, anticipated experience of fostering, expectations about a foster child's experience of the

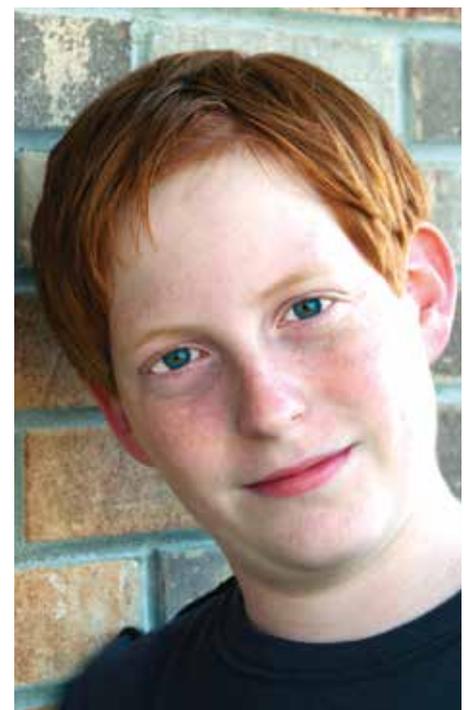
family, placement considerations and preferences and attitudes to contact and working with birth families). The form is designed so that the questions and focus in Section B can be varied for different types of placement.

Since 2000, Form F has adopted a competency approach (BAAF, 2000), focusing on "the interaction between values, knowledge and skills" (Beesley, 2010, p.20). The use of competencies helps to identify the realities of the fostering role and enables applicants and assessors to provide evidence of their existing knowledge and skills, while also identifying areas for further development. The form includes a checklist of competencies under four headings (caring for children, providing a safe and caring environment, working as part of a team, own development), where assessors must indicate the extent to which these have been met; and a personal professional development plan based on the areas for further development identified in the checklist.

This practice of using an evidence-gathering approach to assess applicants' potential to foster – by highlighting areas needing development alongside current strengths – reflects the approach adopted by the authors of the questionnaire measures discussed above. Additional evidence-gathering instruments exist that can be used in this way. For example, The Fostering Network's 'Skills to Foster' preparation course (The Fostering Network, 2009) includes a self-assessment table for candidates to fill in, covering their current skill level across a range of competencies. The table is intended to be updated with the help of a social worker as applicants progress through the process.

The UK is not the only area to adopt evidence-gathering instruments in the selection of new foster carers. In Australia, for instance, the government of Queensland's form for assessing applicants follows a similar format to Form F (Queensland Government Department of Child Safety, 2006). Like Form F, the Queensland assessment form is based on statutory guidelines and carer competencies. It also asks assessors to work with applicants in producing evidence on the applicant's competencies as a potential carer.

Despite being widely used, the guideline documents provided with Form F and the Queensland form do not indicate the theoretical and/or empirical basis of the forms (stating only which information is required by statutory guidelines) or whether items have been validated against placement outcomes or other measures of foster carer competencies. Work is needed to show the predictive value of these measures. Moreover, Beesley (2010) argues that a competency-based approach does not encourage assessors to gain an in-depth knowledge of applicants, and that some areas such as 'caring for a child' may be more difficult to evidence than others.



<sup>1</sup> Recent amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations (Department for Education, 2013) mean that the use of BAAF's Form F will soon be part of a two-stage process, allowing some applicants to be filtered out early on the basis of accommodation, references or prior fostering difficulties (Stage 1) before the provider decides whether they should go through to the full assessment (Stage 2).

# Supplementary instruments

## Attachment Style Interview (ASI)

Providers often use further instruments to supplement the information gathered for the completion of evidence-gathering forms. For example, many choose to assess the capacity to build secure attachments. Bifulco and colleagues (Bifulco et al., 2008) developed an attachment-based tool that could address concerns over applicants' parenting capacity and the potential match between their characteristics and those of children placed with them.

The ASI is a semi-structured interview with a set of standardised questions, which can be followed up with an open number of probes. Applicants are asked about the quality of their relationships with partners and other close adults, as well as their family of origin. Questions cover the quality of interactions and perceptions of support to produce an overall attachment style and the individual's degree of insecurity.

The first section of the interview covers the level of confiding or emotional support in close relationships and the negativity of interactions in those relationships. The second section includes questions on closeness/distance and autonomy in relationships with other adults (mistrust, constraints on closeness, self-reliance, desire for company), and emotions in relating to others (anger, fear of rejection, fear of separation).

Interviewees are classified as secure, or one of four insecure styles: enmeshed (poor support, high dependency needs); fearful (poor support, 'harm-avoidance' strategies); angry-dismissive (poor support, highly self-reliant and hostile); and withdrawn (difficulty getting close, highly self-reliant). In addition, information on quality of attachments and intensity of negative attitudes is used to categorise the degree of attachment insecurity.

In discussing the strengths of the measure, the authors note that no interviewees have as yet proved unclassifiable, though a small proportion have been classified using two insecure styles. Changes in attachment style across time have been found, usually from an insecure to a secure style; crucially,



the authors note that this is associated with increases in the supportiveness of relationships with others. Questions on support appear to be valid across cultures.

The authors have also developed a version of the ASI specifically related to adoption and fostering (ASI-AF), and at the time of writing in 2008 were looking forward to the results of studies assessing the predictive value of the ASI-AF; however, these results have not yet been published. In any case, Bifulco et al. (2008) caution that the ASI-AF should not be used alone and should not replace professional judgment in assessing potential foster carers or adopters. In addition, they note that the form does not assess applicants' parenting capacity or other competencies required for fostering. Indeed, Beesley (2010) notes that the ASI is sometimes used as part of the overall assessment of fostering and adoption applicants, but cautions that it has not yet been validated for use with this population and has not been tested as a predictor of placement stability.

### Practical guides

Some authors have produced practical guides for fostering services providers, which present a range of options from which they can select in order to tailor-make an assessment programme that best suits the needs of their clients. Cousins (2010) suggests a number of practical exercises that can be used by assessors for fostering or adoption applicants, which will give an insight into the 'real-life'

competencies and reactions (including prejudices) that may not be evident from their answers to existing assessment instruments. Example exercises include getting couples to complete a mildly stressful task together to gauge their reactions, and having applicants interviewed by a panel of young people.

Beesley's (2010) comprehensive practical guide presents a wide range of potential instruments and concepts for agencies to draw on when assessing permanent foster carers (i.e. new applicants looking to retain the 'parental' role beyond the statutory age for foster care, but without adopting). The author presents these as a series of modules to help applicants and their assessors explore eight areas: attachment, loss and trauma; the motivation to parent and expectations of children; the impact on the family, resilience and survival; parenting capacity; identity and difference; contact and children's needs; the particular needs of children already in the family; and the particular issues arising for applicants from different groups, (e.g. single, lesbian and gay, and disabled). The guide is designed to help agencies draw on existing resources (e.g. the ASI) and novel exercises to develop their own assessment procedures. Neither this nor Cousins' (2010) guide have been specifically validated against key areas of foster carer functioning, child safety, child functioning or other placement outcomes.

## Translating selection approaches to other cultures

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Herczog, van Pagée and Pasztor (2001) note that despite international differences in a range of factors including economy, language and the existence of formal foster care provision, countries can adopt each other's approaches to assessment providing the underlying concepts of the approach are universally relevant. This can offer a cost effective way for countries whose foster care provision is in development to implement programmes which standardise the approach taken in assessment, selection and training. The authors present the case of nine European countries that have adapted versions of foster carer assessment and training programmes from the USA.

Delgado and Pinto (2011) report on the results of a Portuguese translation of the CFAI-A (excluding the Kinship Care subscale) piloted with 100 female and 65 male existing foster carers across state and private agencies. Several items were removed due to translation or cultural issues, and statistical analyses suggested that a shorter scale of 40 items would be more appropriate with this group. The Fostering Child Development subscale also seemed to be measuring two different concepts, rather than the original one (details are given in Appendix A). The CFAI-A was not tested against placement outcomes. Notwithstanding this promising report of the translation of one Casey Foster Family Assessment measure to the European setting, the authors of the CFAI caution against assessors trying to translate the questions ad-hoc as translations may be inaccurate and change the information obtained from the measure (Buehler et al., 2006a). Careful translation and back-translation is needed, along with a review of each item for its suitability for screening in that particular foster care delivery system.

Further evidence from Australia suggests that the translation of selection instruments from one culture to another is not always successful. Bromfield et al. (2007) interviewed professionals, foster carers and young people in care in Australia to ask about factors in the selection process that could put applicants off continuing with their applications. The study was conducted with particular reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander carers, and identified four shortcomings in the process. First, selection instruments are based on parenting values and living standards that are distinctly Anglo-Saxon in their emphasis on material resources; while Indigenous communities have higher rates of poverty, this does not mean they are unable to provide good quality care. Similarly, cultural differences such as living arrangements and the care of extended family mean that Indigenous children may have different needs. Second, the selection process may exclude applicants with a criminal history, without acknowledging that a number of Indigenous adults have a police record for minor offences, sometimes as a result of police discrimination. Third, current instruments do not effectively assess a carer's suitability to care for an Indigenous child; cultural awareness needs to be built into training and care planning. Finally, selection instruments use a style of communication that does not match with that of Indigenous people, being seen as abrupt, intrusive, and representing unnecessary 'red tape'. Participants felt that the recruitment of more Indigenous carers would be facilitated by using more flexible approaches to selection, adapting instruments to take into account the communication style of Indigenous people, making use of community knowledge, and ensuring that agencies and child protection departments collaborated in the process.



## Selection issues for specific groups of applicants

As well as the need to consider whether instruments developed to measure the potential of foster care applicants can be transferred across cultures, there is also a broader concern about the usefulness of standard selection processes for specific groups of applicants. For example, Betts (2007) reports on the experiences of single people who have applied to become foster carers. The quotes included in her report show how assessors often focus unfairly on the importance of relationships, for example by adding questions to their assessment process about single applicants' sexuality, attitudes to the opposite sex, or ability to set boundaries for current or future relationships.

As Betts points out, this group of applicants offers a range of potential strengths in comparison to partnered carers, including flexibility, less complex relational dynamics and the ability to offer both focused attention and more consistent parenting messages. She suggests that a more helpful approach for assessors is to use the concept of the 'family life cycle' for both single and partnered applicants, recognising that 'parenting' in biological and fostered families alike not only involves an initial transition to 'parenthood' but also continues to develop after the child arrives.

Further debates have emerged about the way standard selection processes are used with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) applicants. Mallon and Betts (2005) argue that there has been a move away from the argument that lesbian and gay foster carers can be 'just as good' as their heterosexual peers, towards a recognition of the unique strengths and experiences of every individual, and that this has gone hand-in-hand with the development of competency-based assessments. Yet Hicks (2000) argued that the social work assessment in itself produces a 'norm' of heterosexual parenting. He interviewed social workers, team leaders and a manager of children's services in a study focusing on the assessment process for lesbian applicants, and noted that heterosexuality receives little

comment in assessments, while lesbians are 'constructed' through discourse in particular ways. First, lesbian applicants may be constructed as a 'threat' by their 'exclusion' of men; this is reflected in the practice of asking lesbian applicants to provide evidence of a broader social circle including male friends. Indeed, one couple was asked to provide an additional heterosexual referee, which meant they had more referees than was standard procedure. Since there is no evidence base to support the need for this additional screening, it should be discontinued.

Second, lesbian applicants can be constructed as a 'militant' threat to heterosexuality, with a preference shown for those who are 'discreet' about their sexuality. When expressing a preference for female foster children, lesbians may be asked to defend this preference in ways that heterosexual couples are not, and the author argues that this is in part a reflection of the fear of 'indoctrination'. Finally, they may be constructed as 'automatically safe' carers, revealing underlying assumptions about the perpetrators of abuse. Moreover, Hicks notes the challenge posed by LGBT applicants to conventional gendered assumptions about caring roles within the family (e.g. 'Who will be the mother?'). Rather, the screening process for all applicants, regardless of sexuality or relationship status, should be an unbiased functional approach – focusing on who in the household will carry out what caregiving roles, and how the carer or carers can obtain the support they will need to be successful.

Mallon (2007) points out that a person's sexuality – whether LGBT or heterosexual – is just one part of them. Assessment workers therefore need to reach a middle ground, neither over-emphasising nor ignoring the issue of applicants' sexuality. The language and tone used by visiting officers should express openness to LGBT parenting, particularly given that it is more often likely to be a matter of choice than it is for heterosexual couples. The author acknowledges that sexuality is often less of a focus for single applicants than for



couples, in which case questions should not be added to the home study visit to check this; however, if the applicant tells the worker then they should decide together how this information might be recorded (for example, whether it will be accessible to children's social workers when making placement decisions). Workers should in any case understand any expressed need for selective disclosure. Workers can anticipate the potential concerns of children's social workers and discuss these with applicants. Mallon argues that workers should ask about their family's reactions to the applicant's 'coming out', as this helps to provide the broader family picture; applicants should also be asked how they might deal with homophobia directed at themselves or the children placed with them.

## Issues in the application of selection instruments

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It is clear that service providers need to show some sensitivity in their use of standardised selection instruments dependent on the individual applicant. A number of further issues for consideration in the application of standardised measures have been identified. First, assessors need to acknowledge that the way they administer these measures can affect the reactions of applicants. For selection processes that involve interviews, staff training is needed to ensure that questions and responses to applicants' answers are given in a neutral manner, in order to avoid interviewer bias (Rhodes et al., 2006). Where applicants are required to fill in self-report measures such as the CFAI, clear information needs to be given about who will have access to the information, as confidentiality laws can vary across countries or states (Buehler et al., 2006a). The sharing of information can affect the way in which applicants answer questions.

Lindsey (2001, p.20) identifies several potential barriers that assessors might pose to the use of selection instruments:

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*Lack of understanding of the importance of positive parenting for the social and emotional health of the child, lack of familiarity with available instruments among child welfare staff, lack of competence to administer and interpret such tools, and the lack of federal or state requirements that this factor be considered in a rigorous way when conducting foster parent assessments.*

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Crucially, service providers must understand that standardised instruments will not 'do the job' of selecting future carers for them. As Cousins (2010, p.4) points out:

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*Assessment is a skilled job – it is not a case of writing down what applicants say and filling in forms. All the information about people's background, lifestyle, personality, attitudes, skills and relationships has to be sifted, evaluated and analysed.*

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Buehler et al. (2006a) caution that standardised assessment instruments such as the CFAI and CHAP should not be used as the sole basis to accept or reject an applicant: such decisions should only be made on the basis of a variety of sources of information. Observations during home visits might indicate something quite different to self-reported answers on the CFAI and CHAP. Moreover, some applicants may feel threatened by having to complete a 'personality test'- style instrument - particularly if they have limited or negative educational experience - further supporting the need for a rounded assessment and selection process.

Buehler et al. (2006b) also note that successful foster care depends not just on the carers, but also on the system around them; it is important for applicants to feel that they will be part of a team. In line with this view, Adcock (2010) cautions that the drive towards standardised assessments as a more cost-effective option in selecting foster and adoptive parents ignores the fact that the key issue is the on-going relationship between applicant and agency, which can encourage positive development in the individual that would not be captured by a 'scientific' tool. The author stresses the importance of preparation, informing applicants of what will be involved in the role and supporting them in achieving this. This approach is based on the assumption that applicants will develop throughout the course of the assessment and beyond, and that agencies should help them in this development. From this perspective, selection instruments should not be used to select the 'finished product', but to assess the applicant's potential for fostering.

Finally, Mellon and Betts (2005, p.34) highlight a key difficulty with the use of selection measures:

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*For the applicants and for the assessing social worker, they are trying to make sense of a future that may be radically and unpredictably different from both current circumstances and past experience... Predicting the future is an inexact science.*

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## Limitations of the current evidence base

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We have identified a number of limitations with the evidence discussed in this review. First and foremost, there is a lack of evidence on the predictive value of most of the instruments designed to help service providers in the selection and approval of new foster carers. It is possible that many fostering agencies internationally have developed their own instruments or have used established measures, and that they have piloted them to test their usefulness; however, these data have not been made available via online research databases or websites. Publishing validation data would enable researchers to pool their knowledge and so provide the most robust evidence possible to providers on the benefits of using particular selection measures.

Even in published studies, there were difficulties in assessing the predictive validity of the instruments employed. Most selection measures have been tested with existing foster carers, rather than their target population of new applicants. Moreover, our review highlights a lack of research linking the characteristics and competencies of new foster care applicants to later measures of success such as placement stability and length of time spent fostering.

For those few studies that measured placement outcomes, it is also questionable whether they were focusing on the right ones. For example, child safety from further child maltreatment is an essential outcome to focus on, along with the carer's ability to help the child find permanence and develop in healthy ways. Berridge (1997) notes that using the stability or disruption of placements as a measure of 'success' is relevant, but that it may not be as important as the quality or level of reward gained by the child from the time spent in the placement. However, we recognise the difficulties inherent in attempting to gain an objective measure of placement quality.

Finally, the lack of prospective research means that the majority of publications featured here have focused exclusively on the characteristics of potential or existing foster carers. In contrast, Sinclair et al. (2005) argue that success also depends on the characteristics of the child, the chemistry between child and carer and contextual factors such as the level of support provided by social workers. While measurements of the competencies of foster care applicants might provide a general picture of their potential for placement success, it is the interaction of carer, child and external factors that will ultimately determine whether or not a particular placement is a success. Yet only one of the studies in our review took any measures relating to the child (Cautley and Aldridge, 1975); in general, where social workers and family placement workers were consulted, it was solely to gather information about the foster carer. This is especially important if we consider how few of the instruments in the review examine whether specific skills might be needed for working with particular types of children (e.g. very young children, young people with disabilities or challenging teenagers).

It is widely accepted that a foster carer who is ideal for one type of child may be less effective with another. Moreover, further work is needed to determine whether the range of 'desirable' applicant characteristics that have been drawn from national standards and professional experience would also be identified if fostered children were asked what makes a 'good' foster carer.



# Conclusions

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The review revealed a number of key themes in the literature on the measures available to assess new foster care applicants. The research base in this field is very limited. However, at present the balance of evidence and informed professional opinion suggests that there is:

- A potential role for selection instruments to improve the selection of foster carers provided they are not used as the sole basis to accept or reject an applicant. A variety of sources of information should be used to cross-check profiles of carers within a broader process of approval.
- Additional potential for selection instruments to be used in identifying strengths and areas in which foster carer applicants are likely to need training and support in the future.
- A limitation in the validity of the instruments to 'predict the future' by linking the characteristics and competencies of new foster care applicants to later measures of success. The inability to compare instruments in terms of their predictive power is partly due to insufficient collection of data from foster care applicants rather than established carers. In addition, many studies failed to test the predictive power of selection instruments by measuring their relationship to child safety, ability to achieve permanency, placement stability, carer retention, child well-being or other desired outcomes.
- Potential bias from inadequately trained interviewers that might affect applicants' responses and thereby invalidate the findings.
- A need to recognise the importance of the on-going relationship between applicant and agency in developing and strengthening skills and competencies in fostering. The selection instrument needs to be presented in a way that makes clear its role in this longer-term process.
- The possibility for transfer across countries of instruments for selection. Whereas some 'desirable' foster carer attributes such as empathy for children, nurturing qualities and flexibility are likely to be equally applicable across countries, the cultural values reflected in the tool itself or in the process of selection within which it is embedded might create problems.



## Recommendations for policy and practice

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Given the limited evidence available on the role and predictive power of the selection instruments reviewed here, recommendations for policy, practice and further research draw on the reasoned reflections of experienced practitioners and researchers on the literature in this review. Recommendations for policy and practice include:

- Begin any development or revision of an instrument designed to assess foster carer applicants by thinking carefully about the core outcomes being sought (for example, child safety, legal and emotional permanency and child well-being), and how the foster carer can contribute to those outcomes.
- Consider expanding selection instruments to address additional important attributes. Asking children and young people with foster care experience to identify desirable characteristics in foster carers could also increase the relevance of selection instruments, provided they translate into successful placements.
- Instruments for selecting or rejecting applicants to fostering may appear to be cost-effective but the temptation to use them in isolation should be resisted. Recognition that instruments are only part of the process and that the developing and strengthening of skills and competencies is an important aim interacting with selection, service providers should direct their limited resources across the on-going relationship between applicant and agency.
- Fostering service providers should ensure that assessors using selection instruments as part of a wider process are thoroughly trained in collecting and analysing information from a range of sources including selection instruments, observation of carer applicants in orientation/training sessions and interviews and observations undertaken in the carer home, conducted sensitively in a way that reduces bias.
- Fostering service providers should adopt more flexible and open approaches to selection in order to reduce bias against specific groups. The use of standardised selection instruments may have a role within the process in doing this. In applying instruments, use should be made of local community knowledge to address cultural issues. For example, poverty should not be conflated with lack of capacity to provide good quality care. In addition, assessors should neither over-emphasise nor ignore the circumstances and strengths of single and LGBT applicants.
- Countries developing their fostering services should consider the utility of adapting selection instruments to suit local cultural values while acknowledging that adaptations potentially reduce any established validity until the modified instrument has been tested with that population.

## Recommendations for further research

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The review has revealed a lack of studies employing prospective designs that use selection instruments to predict later child and placement outcomes. Future studies are needed that:

- Are prospective, involving a sample of foster care applicants in testing the selection and approval instruments.
- Follow up these applicants for a reasonable period of time using clear outcome measures such as child safety from abuse or neglect, placement stability, duration of fostering experience, or most importantly child measures such as achievement of permanency and other benefits experienced by the children fostered.
- Use appropriate designs and samples that are large enough to make robust claims about findings.
- Explore the potential role of the perspectives of the child or young person in terms of what they look for that might be predictors of future success.

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The Rees Centre is committed to providing robust, useful and timely research and will be consulting a wide range of stakeholders on the findings from this review and considering how to take these recommendations forward. We look forward to your comments.

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# Appendix A

## Details of statistical analyses

### CFAI-A original study (Orme et al., 2006d)

The subscales were generally correlated with each other, but not too highly; this suggests that the underlying constructs were related but sufficiently distinct. The authors report good-to-excellent internal consistency (i.e. all the items on one subscale seem to be assessing the same concept), although Integrating Foster Children and Kinship Care were less consistent. A separate report on the Coparenting subscale used with this sample (Cherry and Orme, 2011) indicated that this subscale seems to measure something distinct from the constructs tapped into by measures of marital quality and parenting.

Extensive validation analyses were conducted on the CFAI-A (Orme et al., 2006d), testing participants' scores on the six subscales against concurrent demographic characteristics, self-reported fostering outcomes and scores from the CHAP. A statistical technique called 'multiple regression' enabled the authors to isolate the contribution of a particular subscale to variations in another factor such as carers' intention to continue fostering. The regressions supported the measure's ability to predict conceptually similar outcomes; for example, self-reported potential to handle Worker/Agency Challenges predicted higher self-assessed fostering ability and expecting to need fewer support services. Greater potential to promote Foster Child Development predicted carers' intention to continue fostering for up to three years, while greater potential to handle Challenging Children predicted having spent more years fostering and having had more placements. The stability of foster placements was not measured.

There are some limitations with the scale validation analyses reported. The authors used a statistical technique called 'exploratory factor analysis' to check whether each of the proposed subscales consisted of a set of questions that were related to a discrete underlying construct, but the usual full procedure

was not followed. Generally, the analysis would be performed on all questions from the whole measure at the same time, in order to check that each question relates most strongly to one particular subscale (e.g. Foster Child Development) rather than being equally similar to questions on another subscale (e.g. Challenging Children). However, the statistical procedure relies on having a much larger number of people answering the questionnaire than there are questions in the measure; as the authors did not have a large enough sample, they ran multiple analyses with random subsets of questions, a compromise which makes any claims about the structure of each subscale less robust.

### CFAI-A online study (Orme, 2007a)

This study produced generally similar results on the structure of the subscales; however, the sample size was still not large enough to run the full analysis and in this instance there was some indication that the Challenging Children and Integrating Foster Children subscales might be tapping into the same underlying construct. There were also significant differences in the mean scores of participants in the online study compared to those in the original study. Moreover, the analysis in this report did not include linking scores on the CFAI-A subscales to any placement outcomes, again compromising any claims about the measure's predictive capability.

### CFAI-A Portuguese study (Delgado and Pinto, 2011)

The Portuguese sample was older and had less education than the sample reported by Orme et al. (2006d); there was also a greater proportion of women describing themselves as housewives. Portuguese carers in general had fostered fewer children but for longer periods of time. Several items were removed due to translation or cultural issues, and exploratory and confirmatory factor

analyses suggested a final scale of 40 items from the initial 74, as well as the need to split the Fostering Child Development subscale into one subscale representing educational development and involvement with the child's biological parents (FCD-A), and another representing social development and the transmission of rules (FCD-B). The Portuguese version of the CFAI-A therefore has six subscales: FCD-A, FCD-B, CC, WAC, CP and IFC. Reliability of subscales was acceptable to excellent. No tests of concurrent or predictive validity were reported.

### CFAI-W original study (Cuddeback et al., 2007)

Factor analyses suggested that the workers' version had one core subscale for all applicants (General Potential), rather than the three found in the CFAI-A; further analyses suggested that three shorter, 58-item versions of this subscale would provide equivalent scores and could be used interchangeably with participants. As with the CFAI-A, internal consistency was good-to-excellent, except on the Kinship Care subscale. Moreover, higher scores on General Potential, Coparenting and Integrating Foster Children all predicted licensure status of carers, as well as the likelihood of having a current placement. Again, however, the analyses suffered from the sample size, and a further complication lay in the fact that most subscale scores were higher when the families identified were better known to the workers completing the measure. Placement stability was not measured.

### CFAI-W online study (Orme 2007b)

Exploratory factor analyses for this sample partially supported the subscale structure from the original studies. The men's responses to the Integrating Foster Children items appeared to tap into two underlying constructs, rather than the one previously identified; as a result, internal consistency on this particular subscale for men was poor. As with the CFAI-A,

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some of the mean subscale scores, when completed online, were significantly different to those in the original studies.

## **CHAP (Orme et al., 2006c)**

Exploratory factor analyses suggested that most of the questionnaires in the CHAP measured a single distinct construct, with the exception of Reasons for Fostering (which tapped into a large number of motivations), Willingness to Foster (which had subscales relating to children with emotional/behavioural problems, special needs, under-sixes, age six and over and children of a different race/religion/culture/sexual orientation) and Help with Fostering (distinguishing between support from worship groups, professionals and extended kin). Each scale showed acceptable-to-excellent internal consistency.

Several of the scales included in the first part of CHAP showed links with concurrent placement measures. Higher scores on the Available Time Scale predicted greater intention to continue fostering and more fostering experience (years spent as a carer and number of placements). Greater Willingness to Foster children with emotional/behavioural difficulties, other special needs or disabilities predicted having fostered a greater number of children over a longer period of time, and having had fewer children removed from the home. Higher Cultural Receptivity in Fostering and more anticipated Help with Fostering from professionals both predicted greater intention to continue fostering. Moreover, there were correlations between a number of these scales and relevant subscales on the CFAI-A, such as those measuring satisfaction with fostering and personal dedication to the role.

Each of the three sets of Fostering Challenges vignettes showed good-to-excellent internal consistency, and more positive scores predicted having fostered for a longer period of time and fewer requests to have children removed, but also – unexpectedly – fewer current placements (Orme et al., 2006c). Rhodes et al. (2006) note that because CHAP

uses open-ended questions, this makes reliability difficult to test.

## **Potential for foster parenthood (Touliatos and Lindholm, 1981)**

Statistical analysis of the scale led to a reduction in its length, from 64 to 54 items. The analysis showed that some of the items that were assigned to a particular subscale could equally have belonged in a different subscale, making the distinction between some of these areas a little ambiguous. In addition, although the authors reported excellent internal consistency, this is reported only for the scale as a whole and not for the separate subscales. There was no analysis to show whether or not higher scores on the scale indicated greater placement success.

## **Predictors of success for new foster parents (Cautley and Aldridge, 1975)**

Correlations between social worker and researcher ratings of placement success were low. Applicants were asked why they inquired about fostering, the challenges they anticipated in the role, their spouse's attitude to fostering, the good and bad points about their own children, their own family background, the family's approach to decision-making, and their attitudes towards social workers and the potential foster child's birth family. They also responded to vignettes about foster children's behaviour and descriptions of defiant, withdrawn, careless and slow children.

Taken separately, none of these predicted placement success; so the authors created clusters of characteristics using multiple correlations, an analysis of which variables are most highly related to each other (though details of how individual variables were selected for these clusters are not reported). First, social workers' evaluations of the foster mother's success were correlated with (the authors argue

'predicted by') the mother's experience with siblings, clustered with the father's degree of flexibility, handling of theft and differentiating between incidents, and ability to handle a careless, withdrawn, or defiant child. Second, social workers' evaluations of the couple's success in handling the child's problems were more weakly associated with applicants' characteristics, but showed some correlation with a cluster consisting of the foster mother's ability to handle a withdrawn child and the father's number of siblings and perceived affection and warmth of own father.

The research staff's evaluation of the foster father's success was correlated with the father's attitudes towards social worker supervision, perceived affection and warmth of own father and religiousness of own parents, clustered with the mother's differentiation in regard to her own children and handling of a hypothetical theft and ability to differentiate between incidents. Their evaluation of the foster mother's success was correlated with the mother's role in major decision-making, experience in caring for other people's children, extent of experience with siblings and skill in handling behavioural incidents, clustered with the father's ability to handle a careless child and concern for the child shown when discussing possible difficulties in foster care. Finally, the research staff's evaluation of the combined couple's success correlated with the mother's extent of experience with siblings and role in major decision-making, clustered with the father's number of siblings, perceived affection and warmth from own father and religiousness of own parents, role in major decision-making and handling of a vignette about a broken toy.

The authors also analysed these 'predictors' with a set of 'intervening variables': the prior experiences of the social worker and the foster child, and the age and makeup of other children in the foster family home. None of these affected the correlations between clusters of applicant characteristics and placement success.

# Appendix B

Table 1.  
Details of measures included in the review

Measure	Reference	Country	Number of participants (if applicable)	Links to placement outcomes reported
Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Applicant version (CFAI-A)	Description: Buehler et al. (2006a) Validation: Cherry and Orme (2011); Orme et al. (2006d); Orme et al. (2007)	USA	304 existing foster carers	Yes
Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Applicant version (CFAI-A)	Orme et al. (2006a)	USA	111 male-female existing foster carer couples	Yes
Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Applicant version (CFAI-A)	Orme (2007a)	USA	610 online respondents (existing foster carers, new applicants and 'other')	No
Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Applicant version (CFAI-A) – excluding Kinship Care subscale	Delgado and Pinto (2011)	Portugal	165 existing foster carers	No
Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Worker version (CFAI-W)	Description: Orme et al. (2006d) Validation: Cuddeback et al. (2007)	USA	208 social workers responding about 416 existing foster homes (a total of 712 individuals)	Yes
Casey Foster Applicant Inventory-Worker version (CFAI-W)	Orme (2007b)	USA	Workers responding online about 265 foster care applicants	No
Casey Home Assessment Protocol (CHAP)	Description: Rhodes et al. (2006) Validation: Cherry et al. (2009); Coakley and Orme (2006); Orme et al. (2006b); Orme et al. (2006c); Orme et al. (2013)	USA	304 existing foster carers	Yes

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Reference</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of participants (if applicable)</b>	<b>Links to placement outcomes reported</b>
Swedish questionnaire	(Socialstyrelsen, 2011)	Sweden	146 existing foster carers	No
Swedish questionnaire and interview	(Socialstyrelsen, 2012)	Sweden	25 social workers each responding about one or two existing foster carers or foster care applicants	No
Potential for Foster Parenthood	Touliatos and Lindholm (1981)	USA	Social workers responding about 472 existing foster carers	No
Predictors of success for new foster parents	Cautley and Aldridge (1975)	USA	963 foster care applicants; 145 followed up	Yes
BAAF Form F	BAAF (2008)	UK	Not applicable	No
Skills to Foster	The Fostering Network (2009)	UK	Not applicable	No
Queensland Form 3A	Queensland Government Department of Child Safety (2006)	Australia	Not applicable	No
Attachment Style Interview (ASI)	Bifulco et al. (2008)	UK	Not applicable	No
New assessment and preparation techniques	Cousins (2010)	UK	Not applicable	No
Practical resources for assessments	Beesley (2010)	UK	Not applicable	No

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