

The impact of fostering on foster carers' children

An international literature review

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Dedication

Rees Centre publications do not usually include a dedication. However, one of our advisors, having herself experienced being in care, suggested that this publication should be dedicated to the children of foster carers who should be recognised as a hidden asset and rewarded for their selflessness. They are giving in so many ways yet sometimes on the receiving end of the most difficult behaviour. Many then go on to become foster carers themselves.

We hope this publication will lead to a greater acknowledgement of their contribution.

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Executive Summary

When a family experiences the transformation to a family who fosters, there will be many changes in family relations and general family life. It is the whole family who fosters, and the involvement of carers' children in the caring task should be acknowledged (Martin, 1993). Evidence suggests that many foster carers are concerned about the effects fostering might have on their children (Poland and Groze, 1993). There is some evidence of an increased risk for placement breakdown if foster carers have children of their own living at home (e.g. Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Cautley, 1980; Kalland and Sinkkonen, 2001; Quinton et al., 1998), though this evidence is contradictory (e.g. Farmer et al., 2004; Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs, 2005). Nevertheless, the impact of fostering on the lives of the sons and daughters of foster carers has largely been overlooked both in research and practice, and is an issue of international concern (Höjer, 2007; Part, 1993; Poland and Groze, 1993; Twigg and Swan, 2007; Watson and Jones, 2002).

This review of the international research on the impact of fostering on foster carers' children was undertaken in order to identify the ways in which carers' children might be more effectively prepared and supported when their families are fostering. The main review questions were:

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- How well are foster carers' children prepared for life in a family that fosters?
 - What is the impact of the presence of looked after children and young people on foster carers' children?
-

Electronic databases and websites were used to identify 17 studies from the UK, US, Canada, Sweden, Belgium and Spain. Comparisons across countries are subject to limitations of different cultures and services. Studies identified for the review were published since 1990 and included details of foster carers' children's experiences. The studies used a range of methodologies from in-depth interviews and focus groups to larger scale surveys using questionnaires. The review does not address the experiences of children of kinship carers or those of adoptive parents.

Most of the studies were exclusively qualitative thereby providing some interesting insights into the perspectives of carers' children on their experiences of fostering but no robust evaluations of outcomes. Study samples were relatively small (mostly 20 or fewer participants), limiting possibilities of generalisation. Most studies adopted a retrospective design, seeking the perspectives of carers or their children on the impact of fostering as experienced in the past. No studies were identified in the review that reported on interventions aimed at better preparing or supporting carers' children that had been subjected to evaluation using comparison or control groups.



Key Findings

Each fostered child and each carer's child is an individual and their characteristics will influence how fostering is experienced and the relationship between them. However, some clear messages emerged from this review of the international research on the impact of fostering on carers' children.

- **Being involved in the decision to foster enhances subsequent adaptation**
The importance of being part of the decision to foster is a key finding in many of the studies. The children and young people in carers' families need to be involved in family discussions concerning the decision to foster and should not be seen as less significant, passive members of the family. The evidence from this review suggests that fostering will have an impact on their lives and they need to understand how and in what ways they will be affected.
- **Being informed about fostering and about each particular child reduces conflicts**
When the family has made the decision to become foster carers, children and young people similarly need to be informed about the nature of fostering – both positive and negative aspects. In some of the studies, sons and daughters of foster carers suggested that peer support groups were a good way to give information and some fostering providers do run these but no robust evaluations of them were identified. For example, in the UK The Fostering Network produces materials and activities¹ including a magazine targeted specifically at this group ('Thrive') and campaigns to celebrate their contribution. Other countries may run similar schemes. However, unless such activities are subjected to evaluation, their impact in terms of outcomes for children remains unknown. Information is important, not only in the initial phase of fostering but throughout the entire fostering process. Children and young people, as well as foster carers,

need to be informed about specific foster children before they join the family. Such information makes it easier for them to understand and to cope with difficult behaviour, and makes them feel involved, competent and part of the process. This is an important message to social workers and potential foster carers. It is imperative to recognise the role that sons and daughters of foster carers can perform, and ensure that they are provided with relevant information. It was evident that those children and young people who had received relevant information developed a significantly better relationship with foster children.

- **Foster carers need to identify 'protected' time for their children**
In many of the studies, children and young people suggested that their parents became extensively involved in their fostering task. They stated that their parents spent insufficient time with them and were unable to listen to them adequately due to the demands of fostering. Sometimes children and young people said that they felt excluded in the family and forgotten by their parents. They acknowledged the importance of the fostering task and that their parents had to give adequate attention to the foster children, but they still felt left out.
- **Limiting information and sensitive information**
Some of the participants in the studies were of the opinion that they did not want too much information – this was more common among the younger children. Some of the participants did not want to be too involved, because to be involved also implied responsibility. There were examples from studies in which both children of foster carers, and the carers themselves, found that children sometimes had to process information about abuse, neglect and violence that was very challenging.

- **Being allowed to discuss problems**
Other important messages from the research on sons and daughters of foster carers reflected the significant changes in everyday life that fostering brings about in the family. These changes involved both positive and negative aspects. Examples of negative aspects were sharing of parents' time with potentially less attention from parents, sharing of belongings, less personal space and having to cope with difficult behaviour from foster children. Some children and young people said they really resented these negative aspects of fostering although many seemed able to cope.

One factor improving the capacity to cope was the opportunity to have open discussions about perceived difficulties, primarily with their parents, but also with social workers. If children and young people were allowed to complain about the things they found problematic with fostering and were enabled to display negative feelings, they were better equipped to cope with problems. Some children and young people who participated in the studies said that they did not want to trouble their parents with their own difficulties, and some also had a notion that they were not 'eligible' to complain.

- **Preparing carers' children for ending of placements**
Providing information and talking to all members of the foster family is also of great importance when a placement ends. Some children and young people stated that the ending of placements was the most difficult aspect of fostering. There were several examples from the studies in which sons and daughters of foster carers felt that they had not been informed when a child moved from the family, and their feelings of grief and loss were not recognised.

¹ www.fostering.net/all-about-fostering/sons-daughters

Recommendations for policy and practice

- **Engaging foster carers' children in the fostering process**

Foster carers should consider how their children could be involved in discussions and decisions about starting to foster. Fostering services should encourage this by ensuring they are listened to, and particularly that they are recognised as potential active caregivers.

- **Ensuring foster carers' children are well informed**

Fostering services should review current practices in order to improve information and support to carers' children to ensure that they are well informed. Some fostering providers distribute information packs or hold information sessions for children in families starting to foster but this is not consistently provided and rarely evaluated. However, social workers and foster carers need to listen to children and young people, and be sensitive to what kind of information they require.

- **Foster carers' children need on-going support**

Support groups for carers' children can provide an important means of enabling them to cope with on-going challenges, and the benefits of these groups should be evaluated. Children of foster carers, who have had experiences of fostering, can make an important contribution to these groups.

- **Foster carers and social workers need to give carers' children the licence to discuss difficulties**

Carers' children need open discussions about perceived difficulties, primarily with their parents, (which may need to be facilitated by social workers), but also with social workers or support workers. These opportunities need to make it possible for children and young people to reveal their feelings about fostering and receive acceptance when they are negative towards foster children and to fostering. Such open discussions can make it easier for children and young people to cope and to understand their own feelings.

- **Protected parenting time for carers' children**

Foster carers need to find time to spend exclusively with their own children, and social workers and support workers need to support foster carers to make this possible, sometimes through respite arrangements for the foster child. The competing demands on foster carers must be recognised in the process of trying to establish this time, but without it there is strong evidence of carers' children feeling isolated and left out. However, it should be acknowledged that fostered children sometimes feel that the carers' children are treated differently and so this balancing of parenting time must be handled sensitively.

- **Training and professional development**

These implications, and in particular the importance of listening to foster carers' and children's concerns, need to be included in training and the professional development of social workers and school staff.

Recommendations for further research

The studies in this review were generally qualitative, small scale and depended on the retrospective perceptions of carers and their children. Future research should therefore provide:

- Larger scale studies of the perspectives of carers' children that seek to identify the benefits and risks of fostering to carers' children. This might for example build on earlier studies reviewed here by linking the fostered child and fostering family characteristics and perspectives (e.g. gender, disability, ethnicity, family structure, parenting style) to specific outcomes such as carer retention, placement stability and educational outcomes of both the fostered and carers' children;
- Evaluations of interventions designed to increase the benefits and reduce the disadvantages of fostering for carers' children including, for example, the provision of information packs, support groups, campaigns and specific strategies adopted by social workers and support workers to acknowledge these children's role in the fostering process;
- Evaluated interventions targeting the potential for foster carers' children to play a role in the preparation of children or young people who are to be fostered by their family, or in mentoring fostered children or carers' children from other families;
- Prospective, longitudinal studies of carers' children that track their experiences from their parents' initial discussions about fostering through their experiences with subsequent foster children placed in their home. Complementary studies could engage adults whose families fostered in reflecting on the longer term effects including whether they are more social and resilient citizens, whether a higher proportion are employed in social care and educational roles, and the proportion that themselves become foster carers.

Main Report

Background to review

In the past, children were seen as receivers of care, not potential carers (Brannen et al., 2000; James and Prout 1997). More recently, children have become seen instead as active and competent social agents and their contribution in social interactions, both within a familial context and in society as a whole, has been recognised (e.g. Brannen et al., 2000). Martin (1993) emphasises that it is the whole family who fosters, and the involvement of carers' children in the caring task should be acknowledged.

When a family experiences the transformation to a family who fosters, there will be many changes in family relations and general family life. In the initial phase, those living in the household will be assessed by the fostering service provider (known by a range of terms internationally). In this process, the potential foster carers will have to answer questions about issues such as the relationship between the partners, relationships with children and parenting practices. First and foremost they need to get to know the child placed in care, a process that is unique with each child, and will be influenced by the child's previous experiences of family life, of abuse and/or neglect, and the child's personal characteristics and needs (Höjer, 2001).

The family members also need to accept visits from social workers, not always at times they have chosen themselves. All the members of the family – carers and children – will be affected by the fostering task. Twigg (1994) notes that many of the problems in the foster care system originate in a lack of understanding by professionals of the dynamics of the foster family. The family may not be prepared for these changes in family life (Höjer, 2001) or for the time taken in getting to know the foster child, visits from social workers and birth family and participation in meetings. Watson and Jones (2002) conclude that sons and daughters of foster carers are not

thought to have the same need for training and support as their parents though others (e.g. Walsh and Campbell, 2010) have identified possible training needs of these children.

Evidence suggests that many foster carers are concerned about the effects fostering might have on their children (Poland and Groze, 1993) though the vast majority report positive reactions from them. Höjer (2001) found that 76 per cent of 366 foster carers thought their children were positive towards the fostering task, although 24 per cent of them stated that they sometimes neglected their children due to fostering. Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) reported a similar proportion, 73 per cent of carers, rating their children as having a positive reaction to fostering.

Some research also suggests that there is an increased risk for placement breakdown if foster carers have children of their own living at home (e.g. Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Cautley, 1980; Kalland and Sinkkonen, 2001; Quinton et al., 1998). Conversely, Farmer et al., (2004) did not find this to be the case and Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) concluded that those carers whose children lived with them had lower rates of disrupted placements. However, the foster children in these families were younger and less 'disturbed' than those placed in families in which there were no carers' children living at home. Nevertheless, the impact of fostering on the lives of the sons and daughters of foster carers has largely been overlooked, both in research and practice (Höjer, 2007; Part, 1993; Poland and Groze, 1993; Twigg and Swan, 2007; Walsh and Campbell, 2010; Watson and Jones, 2002).

Aims and scope

This review of the international research addresses the effects of fostering on the sons and daughters of foster carers. It does not address the experiences of children of kinship carers or those of adoptive parents. It was undertaken in order to better understand how fostering affects foster carers' children and how they might be effectively supported. The main review questions were:

- How well are foster carers' children prepared for life in a family that fosters?
- What is the impact of the presence of looked after children and young people on foster carers' children?



Methodology

This review synthesises the findings from the international literature on the ways in which fostering impacts on the children of foster carers. A number of electronic databases were searched, including Medline, PsycInfo, ERIC, British Education Index, Australian Education Index, Conference Proceedings Citation Index, Campbell and Cochrane Libraries, International Bibliography of Social Sciences, SCOPUS, Social Policy and Practice, Social Services Abstracts, Social Sciences Citation Index and ASSIA. The following websites were searched: EPPI, NFER, C4EO, SCIE, The Fostering Network, BAAF, NCB, NSPCC, Casey Family Programs, Joanna Briggs Institute, What Works Clearinghouse, Department for Education, Chapin Hall, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in Administration for Children and Families (USA).

Our search incorporated varied international terminology for foster care including 'foster care', 'foster parent*²', 'foster famil*', 'substitute famil*', 'family foster home', 'child* in care', 'looked after', 'looked-after' and 'out-of-home care'. The key terms used in the search included 'biological children', 'biological famil*', 'own children', 'own famil*', 'birth children', 'birth famil*', 'carer's children', 'carer's famil*', 'son*' and 'daughter*'.²

Titles and abstracts of the publications identified from the electronic searching were then screened and only included if published since 1990. Finally, a range of international experts on foster care were also contacted to suggest any references that were not uncovered by the electronic search. The review was restricted to empirical studies, though discursive papers informed the background, context and discussion. We did not restrict the review on the basis of particular kinds of methodology but applied a quality threshold to ensure that only studies reaching a minimum standard of quality (as judged for the chosen methodology by journal reviewing standards) were included in the review. Studies that were exclusively about kinship carers or adoption were excluded.

Status of the studies

The 20 research publications identified represent 17 different studies. As we did not use search words in languages other than English (and Swedish), most articles are from English-speaking countries (though one was recommended by our Spanish colleague). This is a limitation of the study, as there might be research papers written in other languages about which we have no information. The studies were undertaken in the following countries and different contextual systems should be acknowledged which may limit transferability of some of the findings:

| | |
|---------|----|
| UK | 10 |
| USA | 2 |
| Canada | 2 |
| Sweden | 1 |
| Belgium | 1 |
| Spain | 1 |

Four studies took a purely quantitative approach, eight used only qualitative methods – mainly interviews and focus groups – and five used mixed methods, involving both quantitative analysis (mainly of questionnaires) and interviews. Many of the qualitative studies involved a small sample: five studies had only 6 – 9 participants. Some researchers (e.g. Poland and Groze, 1993) involved carers' children alongside the carers themselves, whereas others (e.g. Höjer, 2007; Watson and Jones, 2002) focused solely on the carers' children and so accessed larger samples drawn from this group.

Additionally, two research reviews were identified (Thompson and McPherson, 2011; Twigg and Swan, 2007) which are referenced in our discussion.

Details of the studies can be found in Table 1 in the Appendix.

² Use of * in reviewing enables all terms with that prefix to be searched simultaneously



Key Findings

How well are foster carers' children prepared for life in a family that fosters?

Participation of foster carers' children in the decision to foster

When families decide to start fostering, the decision is initiated by one or both of the parents, prompted by a range of motivations such as contact with other foster carers, love of children and the wish to make a contribution to the community (e.g. Höjer, 2001; Sebba, 2012; Triseliotis et al., 2000). Martin (1993) emphasised the need for professionals and parents to involve children in the decision to foster and this view was shared by many others (Fox, 2001; Höjer, 2007; Part, 1993; Swan, 2002; Spears and Cross, 2003). Yet the extent to which the children of foster carers were involved in the decision to foster varied a great deal, across the studies reviewed. All of the children and foster carers in Younes and Harp's (2007) study stated that they had been involved in discussions about starting to foster. In Höjer and Nordenfors' (2004, 2006) large-scale study, two thirds of the children and young people reported being asked their opinion before their parents decided to start fostering; only 22 per cent clearly recalled that they did not participate in the decision.

Yet the perceptions of foster carers and children did not always match: whereas 90 per cent of the foster carers in Poland and Groze's (1993) study reported having discussed fostering with their own children, only 64 per cent of the carers' children reported this to be the case. Martin (1993) found that carers' children felt they had not been listened to, those in Fox's (2001) study felt they were constantly left out of decisions and Spears and Cross (2003, p. 40) reported that children and young people had not been "...consulted by people from

outside the family..." prior to their family starting to foster. Some of the participants in Höjer and Nordenfors' (2004, 2006) study doubted that their parents would have considered their opinion; they thought their parents would have chosen to foster even if they themselves had been negative:

My parents asked me if it was OK, and I said it wasn't, but they didn't care!

(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 155)

The extent to which children and young people were involved in the decision to foster depended partly on their age, with older children more likely to participate in decision-making (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Spears and Cross, 2003).

Preparation for fostering

Some of the studies that focused on children's perceptions showed this preparation stage to be problematic and that their own needs to be prepared for the fostering task were not always taken seriously (Martin, 1993). Martin (1993) describes how one boy reported that social workers told him that his life would not change a lot, that it would be like having a new brother or sister, and how this statement was met by ironic laughs from the other members of the focus group - this was not their experience of the reality. Fox (2001) stated that children of foster carers felt uninformed. Fifteen of the 20 young people in Spears and Cross's (2003) study said they would have liked more preparation. Both children and foster carers in Younes and Harp's study (2007) suggested that fostering turned out to be very different from how it was described in the preparations they received.

There are variations across the studies as to the extent foster carers' children received information about individual foster children. When the decision had been made and the family was about to start fostering, the carers' child(ren) in Younes and Harp's study (2007) reported that they had been informed about the child moving in with their family. In Höjer and Nordenfors' (2004, 2006) study, 39 per cent of foster carers' children stated that they had enough information about foster children before their family started fostering, though 33 per cent felt they did not. Crucially, children and young people were more likely to say they have a good relationship with the foster child if they had received information before they started fostering. In contrast, those in Fox's (2001) study felt they needed more information about the child or young person moving into their home and Poland and Groze (1993) concluded that foster carers' children required more information from social workers about specific foster children's behaviour and how family life in their home would change as a result of foster care.

Young people suggest that information can also be a protective factor (Martin, 1993). For instance, when foster children had been sexually abused, carers' children often experienced disclosures that could be hard to manage without relevant information. If foster carers' children were informed of what had happened to foster children, it was easier for them to know how to react in the best way to disclosures, and also to understand sexualised behaviour. The foster carers who participated in Pugh's (1996) study were of the opinion that they were responsible for educating their own children about fostering. Pugh also found that some children wanted more information, but some did not, as they were of the opinion that more information would give them too much responsibility.

What is the impact of the presence of looked after children and young people on foster carers' children?

The range of positive and negative experiences for foster carers' children that emerge from the literature review are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The impact of fostering on carers' children: benefits and challenges

| Benefits |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciating their families • Feeling part of a team • Making friends • Becoming more caring and empathic • Understanding others' misfortunes • Learning to take responsibility |
| Challenges |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing belongings, space and parent's time • Behaviour difficulties: e.g. stealing, lying • Loss of innocence • Responsibility and worry • Not telling parents about their problems • Confidentiality • Coping with placements ending • Expectations of parents - behaviour • Easing the burden on parents - responsibility |

Appreciating their families, feeling part of a team and making friends

The carers' children in Part's (1993) study reported that companionship (43 per cent), looking after babies and young children (24 per cent), and the challenge of helping (15 per cent) were the best things about fostering:

They are always funny, and they make me laugh. I like having lots of brothers and sisters, because they keep me company

(Part, 1993, p. 27)

Sutton and Stack (2013) reported that all six of their participants felt part of a fostering team. They saw themselves as active members of the family, who could influence what was happening. This perception of participation originated in the ability of foster carers and children to communicate clearly and honestly. Foster carers' children reported that they had taken ownership of the fostering process and saw themselves as an important part of its successes and failures, and that this made them feel proud when positive outcomes were achieved:

You just feel good about it, you know when you see the difference, like how much the child has changed and stuff, cause when I think about what John (looked after child) was like then and what he's like now, and then think about what he would have been like if he had never come here, I mean that's huge!

(Sutton and Stack, 2013, p. 8)

Swan (2002, p.15) found that when the young people in her study reached their mid-teens, there was a "conscious shift toward becoming an equal and supportive partner" in the fostering process. Being involved in caring for foster children had a positive effect, making the young people see fostering as giving them a purpose, and helping them find 'a place in the family'.

Similar findings were reported by Poland and Groze (1993), Spears and Cross (2003) and Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) with respondents claiming that they enjoyed being part of a large family, that they were close to their foster siblings, and that they liked being able to help other children. The children in Sutton and Stack's (2013) study felt that fostering had mostly beneficial aspects and that their lives had changed for the better, with more outings and holidays than they had had previously. Similarly, in the review by Thompson and McPherson (2011) all but one study reported that sons and daughters of foster carers had positive experiences from living with foster siblings. Such positive experiences could involve helping others, gaining in confidence and having a friend. Three of the studies in their review also reported families being closer after they started to foster.

Becoming more caring and empathic

According to foster carers, fostering increased the caring and empathic skills of children and young people, they gained considerable knowledge about human life (Fox, 2001; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Swan, 2002; Watson and Jones, 2002; Younes and Harp, 2007) and learned about the misfortunes of others (Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson, 2004). Foster carers stated that fostering taught their children greater empathy (Höjer, 2001; Younes and Harp, 2007). Young people were reported by foster carers to "display a striking concern for others and awareness of complex emotional issues beyond their years" (Pugh, 1996, p.37). Similarly, Swan (2002) stated that they had a strong sense of responsibility, caring and compassion, and that this sense was part of their identity. Younes and Harp (2007, p. 36) reported that foster carers believed that fostering made their children "better people, who learned about different races and cultures, became more aware of society and open to kids and people of all backgrounds" and "taught our children more about life than we could ever have taught them". These positive attitudes concur with the notion among foster carers, that fostering has a 'pedagogic effect' on their children, and will teach them how to be empathic and tolerant (Höjer, 2001, 2007; Younes and Harp, 2007).

The perceptions of carers' children were that fostering had the effect of making them more open-minded (Pugh, 1996). Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) found that 52 per cent of carers' children declared that fostering was a good thing because it taught them how to be considerate and caring towards other people. A general theme from the research is the experience that fostering provides of different kinds of life situations and hardship that some people endure (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Pugh, 1996; Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson, 2004; Spears and Cross, 2003; Sutton and Stack, 2013). They are proud of this knowledge that makes them feel competent and better informed than their peers, and also than most adults:

One gets to know a lot about how people are, and what they have experienced. Why they behave in certain ways. Compared to my friends, I have a totally different perspective
(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 68)

Sharing belongings, space and parents' time

Although foster carers' children were often positive towards fostering, many studies acknowledged the changes perceived by them such as the need to share belongings and having less personal space, decreased access to parent's time, conflicts and stricter house-rules (Höjer, 2007; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Spears and Cross 2003; Twigg, 1994, 1995). Sharing bedrooms was more controversial (and is not allowed by some fostering providers in England): children and young people were even more negative, many really resenting the sharing of bedrooms, as this created less personal space for themselves and their belongings (Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996).

Sharing parents' time is one of the most tangible impacts on children's lives when their parents start to foster (Poland and Groze, 1993), although one study (Denuwelaere and Bracke, 2007) reported that carers' children and foster children perceived themselves as getting the same amount of support from their parents/carers. Indeed, the self worth of the fostered children in this study was more likely to be affected by levels of parental support than was that of the carers' children. Yet children who are placed in foster care have in many cases experienced neglect and/or abuse and may have great needs for attention and demand a lot of foster carers' time. Foster carers' children are likely to experience decreased access to parental time and attention when their parents become foster carers (Höjer, 2007; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Poland and Groze, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Spears and Cross, 2003; Twigg, 1994, 1995; Younes and Harp, 2007). Poland and Groze (1993) found that sharing of parental time significantly influenced whether or not foster carers' children liked foster children and whether they accepted the changes that occurred in the family due to fostering.

In Twigg's study (1994, 1995), foster carers' children were very much aware of the need for parental attention towards foster siblings, but they felt that they also had a right to attention from their parents. Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) noted that carers' children described situations where they often had to wait, sometimes in vain, for parents to find time to listen to them. One boy (age 16) said that he had to make an appointment with his mother if he wanted her to find time for him. Twenty-three per cent of the respondents stated that they did not get any time with their parents due to their commitment as foster carers, and Thompson and McPherson's (2011) review noted this to be a major issue. However, only two of the six children in Sutton and Stack's study (2013) mentioned competition for parents' time, with one girl describing how she started to misbehave in order to get more attention from her parents. Both children managed to solve this problem by talking to their parents, explaining how frustrated they were:

We spoke to mum and dad and told them how we feel, they explained and told us that they love us, and just because they spend time with the looked-after child doesn't mean that we're not loved. Just being told that worked

(Sutton and Stack, 2013, p. 7)

Additionally, Sutton and Stack (2013) found that one reason for the positive attitude towards fostering seen in study participants was that they were encouraged to discuss problematic issues and that their parents also made sure they spent time with their children.

Impact of foster children's behavioural difficulties

There are frequent accounts in nearly all the studies of how difficult it can be to live with children who previously may have been exposed to neglect and abuse, as noted in previous reviews of the research (e.g. Twigg and Swan, 2007). Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) concluded that significant behavioural difficulties influenced carers' children's liking of the fostered child that in turn was associated with levels of placement disruption. Persistent difficulties between foster children and foster carers' children can be one of the reasons why placements disrupt. However, a study by Amorós et al. (2003) suggested that most difficulties occurred during the initial phase of adaptation, becoming easier with time.





Denuwelaere and Bracke (2007) noted higher levels of aggressive and challenging behaviours in the fostered children compared to the carers' children. The children and young people in Part's (1993) study said that the worst thing about fostering was difficult and annoying behaviour and stealing (24 per cent). Stealing and having their things broken were also described as the most difficult things with fostering in Watson and Jones (2002). Martin (1993) found that carers' children were expected to manage their own feelings when their things were destroyed by foster children. Spears and Cross (2003) noted that stealing in particular was felt as a betrayal of trust, and much resented. In their study, the participating young people also stated that their friends sometimes did not want to visit, as they were afraid that foster children:

... fight a lot, and they lie and steal things. They are dishonest, and make up stories to be popular

(Höjer, 2007, p 77)

Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) found that the impact of foster children's behavioural difficulties was more common among the younger participants. They talked about how foster children could lie, and how they could get the blame for things that they had not done. Sometimes it was really hard for children to understand and cope with difficult behaviour. Twigg (1995), Fox (2001), Swan (2002), Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) and Höjer (2007) all found that it could be difficult for carers' children to talk about this with their parents. Events that children perceived as really problematic, such as foster children's lies and storytelling, were often overlooked by adults and somehow defined as less important than if their own children had

displayed these behaviours. Similarly, Part (1993) and Spears and Cross (2003) found that foster carers' children thought that foster children 'got away' too easily and that they were not punished for things for which they themselves would have been punished.

If I did what they did, I'd get grounded for the rest of my life... I have to be more strict and mature

(Spears and Cross, 2003, p. 42)

One carer's child described a very different type of problematic behaviour:

The worst type of behaviour is not when a child is disruptive, but when a child doesn't do anything... When a child will sit all day and not play, not talk... I think that is the worst because it gets on your nerves. It's not when they're naughty, that's not bad, because you can cope with that..

(Martin, 1993, p. 19)

Some respondents described how foster children had no experience at all of basic house rules such as informing parents of your whereabouts when you leave the house, or to be on time for meals and how to socially interact with family members (Höjer, 2007). The same study also found that several respondents described a dramatic change when the family was gathered to have a meal together. There were frequent reports of turmoil and disruptions connected to meal times.

She couldn't eat... every meal she just screamed as hard as she could. Every meal was like an... incident. It was so hard for her. She started to make a fuss... turned over a glass... and no one ever told her off, it was just that she couldn't cope with the situation. Since the foster children arrived, it was impossible to have a nice meal, even when they were older. These outbursts occurred at every time

(Höjer, 2007, p. 77)

Children and young people are also aware that their foster siblings have lived through problematic experiences before they were placed in foster care, and this makes them put up with behaviour that they would not have done otherwise.

It makes me sad when they scream, and when they hit me, but usually I don't say anything. I know they have problems of their own

(Höjer, 2007, p. 78)

Although carers' children tried to be tolerant and understanding, they sometimes found it hard to cope with difficult behaviour from fostered children and felt guilty about their negative feelings (Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996):

It makes me feel guilty... Confused... you're not sure whether you're supposed to be treating them like a normal brother or sister, or wrapping them up in cotton wool, treating them differently

(Pugh, 1996, p. 37)

Loss of innocence

Although fostering is perceived as predominantly positive and children and young people learn how to be empathic and caring, there is also an obvious risk that they will be exposed to too much information about the hardship of children, about abuse and neglect. Pugh (1996) labels this as a 'loss of innocence'. Some of the carers' children in Höjer and Nordenfors' (2006) study told the researchers about 'terrible things', like the foster child threatening them with a knife and frequent threats of suicide.

Some carers' children found that they "had been exposed to issues they did not want to consider" such as sexual abuse (Spears and Cross, 2003, p.43). This was information with which they did not know how to cope. Younes and Harp's (2007) foster parents reported that their children received an awareness of how bad things can happen to you in life and that this awareness made them less trusting. The impact of fostering on sons and daughters of foster carers can be perceived as worrying by the foster parents with 69 per cent of them in one study (Poland and Groze, 1993) being concerned about the effects fostering had on their children.

Responsibility and worry

Höjer and Nordenfors (2006) found that 66 per cent of children and young people said they 'took responsibility' 'very often' or 'rather often' for their foster siblings. There was a gender difference; female respondents were more 'responsible' than male respondents. When respondents described in what way they took 'responsibility', the most frequently mentioned categories were taking the same responsibility as they take for biological siblings, baby-sitting, educating, practical help and emotional support. In addition, 34 per cent of the carers' children stated that they worried about foster children 'very often' or 'rather often'. They worried about foster siblings having to move back to birth parents against their own will, what happened when foster siblings visited birth parents and about the foster siblings' own behaviour, that they would become abusers of drugs or alcohol or be badly treated by 'unsuitable' friends. Female respondents worried twice as much as male respondents. Generally, this study showed that foster carers' children were very much aware of how exposed foster children could be to different types of risks.

For some carers' children it was difficult for them to identify how they were supposed to behave towards foster children. Pugh (1996) found that older children, and particularly girls, felt confused about whether they were relating to the fostered child as a peer or parent figure, a similar finding to that which emerged from the Thompson and McPherson (2011) review. Pugh posed the question of whether foster carers' children are at risk of growing up prematurely, or having certain aspects of their development distorted.

Expectations of parents

As well as their own sense of responsibility, several of the studies revealed that children and young people felt that their parents expected them to be good and supportive towards foster siblings. It was understood that as sons and daughters of foster carers had been lucky enough to have good parents and a good home, they also had to tolerate difficult behaviour from foster siblings. Children and young people were often told to let foster children be with them and their friends, even though some of them felt this to be a difficult task (Fox, 2001; Höjer, 2007; Spears and Cross, 2003; Swan, 2002). Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) noted that some children and young people said that if they failed to live up to parental expectations of supportive behaviour, their parents were disappointed, which was something they really wanted to avoid.

Foster carers' children were supposed to be more understanding and to put foster children's needs before their own. Some of the participants in Swan's (2002, p.14) study felt that "...their feelings and needs were secondary, and sometimes left them feeling marginalised within their own family..." She also found that children and young people of the carers felt a need to be perfect, with no possibility for them to fail, or to have problems of their own. There was some evidence of foster children leading carers' children astray (Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs, 2005). Expectations on the children of foster carers to be good role models, to set a good example, to be 'perfect' and to be understanding and patient were widely reported in the studies reviewed.

Easing the burden on parents

Several of the studies reported children and young people to be proud of their parents' commitment to help other children (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Younes and Harp, 2007). Sons and daughters of foster carers were often aware of how important it was for their parents to succeed with their fostering task as noted in previous reviews (e.g. Twigg and Swan, 2007). They tried therefore to facilitate the fostering task for their parents, to help them perform well as foster carers. This facilitation may be expressed in different ways. Children and young people may try to be as nice as possible to foster siblings, and to take care of younger foster children to help their parents. In Höjer and Nordenfors' (2004, 2006) study, nearly 60 per cent of the young people agreed with the statement: 'I try to be good and supportive towards my mother/father when she/he is troubled because of my foster sibling'. Swan (2002) reported that foster carers' children wanted to be as 'good' as possible, not to create problems for their parents:

It would have been added stress to my parents if I had also been off the wall, and had all these issues, so I certainly felt this need to be a good kid... If I added any more stress to my parent's life in term of them taking care of kids, I guess I thought well maybe it would get to be too much for them... and then they'd give up fostering and I certainly didn't want them to do that... And I didn't want that responsibility

(Swan, 2002, p. 15)

Similarly, Sutton and Stack (2013) found children and young people extended their caring role to include their parents. The participants in their study felt that they needed to protect their parents (mothers) when foster children were difficult or displayed aggressive behaviour. When the researchers asked the young participants how the problematic behaviour of foster children affected their family, all of them only mentioned the effect it had on their mothers, not on themselves. However, in Younes and Harp's (2007) study, foster carers reported that their children became angry and stressed, one child started to pull his hair out and another became resentful and defiant. Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson (2004) noted that in some cases foster carers reported that the impact on their children had become instrumental in their decision to give up fostering.

A general theme from the research was that children and young people perceived that their own problems and their own needs were not as important as those of the foster children. Carers' children found that they had to put the needs of foster children before their own needs, which often was perceived as stressful (Höjer, 2007; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Martin, 1993). Another way of trying to help their parents was to choose not to tell them about their own problems (Fox, 2001; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Swan, 2002; Younes and Harp, 2002). This sometimes resulted in foster carers being uninformed of the lives of their children who reported that they felt lonely and not seen by their parents.

I don't want to talk to my mum about my problems, because I don't want to make her tired. I don't dare to ask her if she wants to go shopping with me, because if she can't, I'm afraid she'll think that she's not giving me enough of her time, and then she'll have a bad conscience. I feel as if I need to just be out of her way, 'cause it's hard enough for her as it is. I feel as if I'm a burden for her
(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 202)

One of the participants in Twigg's (1994) study felt that it was particularly hurtful not to be able to tell her parents that she found fostering difficult:

If parents wanted a healthy relationship with their kids they would find out what is going on with them and do something about it.

(Twigg, 1994, p. 307)

Confidentiality

The issue of confidentiality was also one of the impacts mentioned in research on children of foster carers. Children and young people were aware that they were not allowed to reveal details about foster children and were respectful towards foster children's vulnerability (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Martin, 1993). Spears and Cross (2003) found that foster carers' children were sensitive about asking too many questions of foster children:

I'm not allowed to ask them about their background, because it might upset them

(Spears and Cross, 2003, p. 41)

Some children found the need for confidentiality to be difficult. One reason was that they are not able to explain difficult behaviour of foster children to their peers, as this would reveal confidential information. Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) found that children and young people regarded themselves as responsible for not revealing any sensitive information about foster children to unauthorised people. For some, this was experienced as problematic.

It can be very hard not to be allowed to tell anyone what has happened. When someone comes and ask you, and you can't say anything...

(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 87)

Spears and Cross (2003) stated that some young people in their study had kept secrets when foster children had asked them to, but most said they would not. Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) divided 'secrets' into three categories:

- Foster children told biological children secrets, which they had to promise not to tell anyone else. 43 per cent of the respondents stated that they had experienced foster siblings telling them secrets, and 20 per cent found this to be something that troubled them;
- Foster carers and/or social workers give them confidential information about foster children, which they are told not to reveal to foster children. 61 per cent had such experience, and 15 per cent thought this was a problem;
- They cannot tell friends about foster children. 70 per cent answered that they had had experience of knowing things about foster siblings they were forbidden to tell friends, and 15 per cent answered that this worried them.

Martin (1993) claimed that it could be easier for foster children, who may have lost their trust in adults, to disclose traumatic experiences to carers' children. This may create a conflict for carers' children about whether they should tell their parents or not. All the young people in Martin's study had experience of foster children disclosing to them before adults had been told, which Martin concluded emphasises the need for clear and open discussions with foster parents and the need for information to carers' children.

Coping with placements ending

In some studies, children and young people said that one of the most difficult experiences with fostering was when foster children had to leave the family (Sutton and Stack, 2013; Walsh and Campbell, 2010; Watson and Jones, 2002; Younes and Harp, 2007). The young people in Fox's (2001) study thought it was particularly difficult when foster children had to leave and they were not consulted or informed. Walsh and Campbell (2010) looked specifically at how carers' children cope with placements ending and noted that sons' and daughters' views rarely formed part of the process of placement moves, and where they did so, their views tended to be communicated through their parents. Unresolved feelings at the end of one placement sometimes affected the carers' child's engagement in the next placement.

Most of the participants in Sutton and Stack's (2013) study had found ways to cope with feelings of loss and sadness when foster children left the family. However, one girl was upset about the ending of the placement, as she felt it was her fault. She felt guilty, as she did not like the child. This girl also used the strategy of not 'being too close' to foster children so as not to get hurt when they leave:

You shouldn't get too close to the foster child because you don't know if they are going to stay or go, so you have to try not to get close to them because then it's harder when they go. So yeah, don't be friends with them

(Spears and Cross, 2003, p. 41)

There also seems to be a need for a rest between placements, a gap in time before the family receives another foster child (Sutton and Stack 2013; Swan, 2002; Twigg, 1995; Watson and Jones, 2002; Younes and Harp, 2007), though in practice this might be an unrealistic expectation of fostering providers.

The impact of age on relationships between carers' children and fostered children

In the studies reviewed it was evident that the age difference between foster carers' children and the foster child often has an impact on their relationship. However, individual differences in experiences suggest that rigid application of age boundaries in the approval of carers may be unhelpful. When fostered children were younger than carers' children, better relationships were reported than when they were close in age (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006). Conflicts with foster children were also related to age. Younger children were more involved in conflicts with foster children than were older children. However, those who have foster siblings the same age as themselves frequently reported experiencing competition and rivalry at different levels (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs, 2005; Twigg, 1994). Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs (2005) noted that the relative ages of the children might be important. Carers were more likely to say that their own children disliked a foster child if the two were close in age, and although closeness in age was not itself associated with disruption, foster children who were disliked by the carers'

children were more likely to disrupt. Höjer and Nordenfors (2006) also found that relationships were better when there was an age difference between foster carer's children and foster children. The 14-17 year olds talked about how foster siblings close in age wanted to be the same as them. One girl described how her foster sister dyed her hair exactly the same colour as she did, and how this girl would repeat her exact statements when they chatted with friends:

This is the worst thing, it's worse than when they say "mum" and "dad". I don't mind that as much as her wanting to be like me.

(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 96)

Pugh (1996) had the impression that older sons and daughters of foster carers are generally less threatened by foster children and were more likely to see themselves as contributing to the caring process. Similarly, Sutton and Stack (2013) found that the children in their study wanted foster children to be the same age, or younger. They perceived older foster children as a threat to their 'helping role' within the fostering team, and wanted to see themselves as active 'helpers' and part of the team:

I didn't want to have someone much older than me cause then I wouldn't feel as if I was looking after them cause they're older than me. And then they might end up helping me with something, and I didn't want that

(Sutton and Stack, 2013, p. 8)

Children in Younes and Harp's (2007) study reported that their position in the family had changed – for example that they were no longer the youngest or the oldest in the family – a fact which they found problematic, as they liked their original birth order. Thompson and McPherson's review had similarly noted that sons and daughters of foster carers sometimes found it difficult to lose their place in the family, which could have a negative impact on their identity.

Perceptions of foster care

In summary, a majority of the children and young people in the studies reviewed had a positive attitude towards fostering (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Part, 1993; Pugh, 1996; Spears and Cross, 2003; Sutton and Stack, 2013; Younes and Harp, 2007). Höjer and Nordenfors (2004, 2006) found that 75 per cent of foster carers' children reported having a 'very good' or 'rather good' relationship with the foster children. However, having a good relationship might imply a greater commitment to the foster child, and as a consequence carers' children feeling more concern when the foster child experiences difficulties and grief when the child leaves the family, which is reflected in the research findings (Fox, 2001; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006; Sutton and Stack 2013; Watson and Jones, 2002; Younes and Harp, 2007). Younes and Harp (2007) noted that both foster carers and children said that their initial feeling was excitement, but that issues of jealousy, competition, fear and anxiety were also part of the changes perceived to be due to fostering. This is confirmed in almost all of the studies reviewed. Twigg (1995) found that carers' children used three different strategies to cope with fostering:

- View the foster child as a needy problem child. The young people tried to find the good in foster children, and emphasised that their family was helping a child.
- Isolate themselves from the foster care experience. Some young people, particularly male participants, tried to keep a distance both from the foster child, and the whole foster care experience. One way of doing this was to stay away from the home, or to stay in their room.
- Objectify the foster child. This was more common in families who received a great number of foster children, who had come and gone. Twigg (1995) also suggests that this was a way to maintain the family boundary.



Advice from children and young people

In the studies reviewed, there are numerous statements from children concerning their experiences of fostering. Some include direct advice from the sons and daughters of foster carers to other children, to foster carers and to social workers. For example, the children and young people in Spears and Cross's (2003) study had the following advice to give peers who were about to start fostering:

Advice to carers' children

- If you are jealous, don't foster!
- Look out for yourself. Be wary.
- Look after any precious possessions carefully.
- If you don't like it, you should say.
- Help your parents and help the child with their problems.
- Be friends with them.
- Don't get too close to them, because they will go.
- Don't gossip to your friends about foster children.
- Help others understand what children go through before they come into foster care.
- Try to get along with them.
- Have your own space to retreat to.
- Don't keep any secrets.
- Sometimes you have to ignore them or walk away. Don't get into arguments or fights.
- If you have a problem, don't bottle it up, but speak to someone.
- Ask for help if you need it.
- Don't tell the children you foster everything.

(Spears and Cross, 2003, p. 44)

In Höjer and Nordenfors (2006), children and young people participating in the discussion groups were asked to give advice to children whose families were about to start fostering, to foster children, to foster carers and to social workers. Children and young people worked in groups, without researchers present, and wrote down their suggestions. Their advice to peers is very similar to that above from Spears and Cross (2003). Below is the advice to foster carers from the two groups of foster carers' children aged 11-14 and 15-17:

Advice to foster carers from carers' children aged 11-14 years

- Don't forget your own children!
- Do things without foster children.
- Be fair!
- Don't forget your "old family".
- Don't make your children be friends with foster children.
- Let them handle this on their own.
- Be stricter with foster children.
- Punish foster children when they do bad things.
- Be aware that foster children are lying, don't accuse your own children.

(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 277)

Advice to foster carers from carers' children aged 15-17 years

- Be nice to yourselves – you deserve it.
- Be stricter.
- Don't be so stressed.
- Let us be on our own.
- Treat your own children and foster children the same.
- Be more patient.
- Spend protected time with your own children.

(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 277)





Gaps in the research

A number of gaps were identified in the research base on important aspects of the experience of foster carers' children.

Relations to siblings

Only two studies mentioned the impact of fostering on the relationship between the sons and daughters of foster carers and their siblings. Younes and Harp (2007) noted that carers' children had mixed views on the influence of fostering on their relationships with siblings. Some reported no changes, one reported an increased closeness and four reported negative changes, such as fighting and competition with a decreased level of closeness, when siblings were better friends with foster children than with the respondent child. Similarly, varied experiences were reported by Höjer and Nordenfors (2006). Some young people said fostering made them feel closer to their siblings, others found that fostering made siblings more distant and also meant more fighting and more conflicts. Over 50 per cent reported no impact while 24 per cent felt the overall impact had been positive.

Contact with foster children's parents

Information about the impact on carers' children of contact with foster children's birth parents is scarce in research. Martin (1993) states that young people found there was a further pressure on them not only to understand foster children, but also to understand the behaviour of parents on access visits. Carers' children "...had become sensitive to the need to hide their spontaneous responses, to be tactful and understanding" (Martin, 1993, p. 20).

In Höjer and Nordenfors (2006) and Höjer (2007) about half of the respondents found that visits of foster children's birth parents had little impact on their lives, but there were also respondents who found such visits to be difficult, particularly when foster children had been exposed to abuse by their parents. One of the girls participating had foster siblings who had been severely sexually abused by their parents:

Knowing all the things they have done, and still have to sit there and be kind to them, that's really hard. I have always found that to be difficult. That's what creates the problems, not the children, but their parents. Every time one has to see them, and after the visits... all the anxiety shown by the children...

(Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006, p. 177)

Contact with social workers

The extent to which sons and daughters of foster carers are recognised and contacted by social workers varies, and this issue is not addressed in most of the studies. Poland and Groze (1993) found that 39 per cent of carers' children mentioned that social workers met with the family to talk about fostering (but not particularly to speak with them). In several studies, both children and foster carers agreed that foster care case workers should spend more time working with foster carers' children during home visits (Höjer and Nordenfors, 2006; Poland and Groze, 1993; Swan, 2002; Watson and Jones, 2002). One of the foster carers who commented on an earlier draft of this report noted that social workers sometimes take the fostered child 'out for treats' leaving the carers' children out. Some children felt listened to: just over a fifth of the carers' children in Watson and Jones's (2002) study reported that social workers had taken their views into account and over 50 per cent offered direct advice to social workers about how to involve them more.

In contrast, all of the carers' children in Swan's study (2002) expressed anger on this issue, feeling as if the social workers marginalised them and did not recognise their efforts at all. When social workers came to visit, they were not allowed to participate in meetings or conversations. Children and young people pointed out that they could have a specific and unique knowledge about foster children, as they interact with them in other ways than do foster carers and other adults. Therefore, they felt that social workers should acknowledge their expertise, and let them contribute to the fostering process (Swan, 2002; Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006).

Limitations of the current evidence base

Most of the studies were exclusively qualitative thereby providing some interesting insights into the perspectives of carers' children on their experiences of fostering but no robust evaluations of what actually happens. With the exception of four studies, samples were small (20 or less participants) limiting possibilities of generalisation. Most studies adopted a retrospective design, seeking the perspectives of carers or their children on the impact of fostering as experienced in the past. Furthermore, no interventions were identified in the review aimed at better preparing or supporting carers' children that could be subjected to evaluations with comparison or control groups.



Conclusions



Each fostered child and each carer's child is an individual and their characteristics will influence how fostering is experienced and the relationship between them. However, some clear messages emerged from this review of the international research on the impact of fostering on carers' children.

Being involved in the decision to foster enhances subsequent adaptation

The importance of being part of the decision to foster is a key finding in many of the studies. The children and young people in carers' families need to be involved in family discussions concerning the decision to foster and should not be seen as less significant, passive members of the family. The evidence from this review suggests that fostering will have an impact on their lives and they need to understand how and in what ways they will be affected.

Being informed about fostering and about each particular child reduces conflicts

When the family has made the decision to become foster carers, children and young people similarly need to be informed about the nature of fostering – both positive and negative aspects. In some of the studies, sons and daughters of foster carers suggested that peer support groups were a good way to give information and some fostering providers do run these but no robust evaluations of them were identified. For example, in the UK The Fostering Network produces materials and activities¹ including a magazine targeted specifically at this group ('Thrive') and campaigns to celebrate their contribution. Other countries may run similar schemes. However, unless such activities are subjected to evaluation, their impact in terms of outcomes for children remains unknown.

Information is important, not only in the initial phase of fostering but throughout the entire fostering process. Children and

young people, as well as foster carers, need to be informed about specific foster children before they join the family. Such information makes it easier for them to understand and to cope with difficult behaviour, and makes them feel involved, competent and part of the process. This is an important message to social workers and potential foster carers. It is imperative to recognise the role that sons and daughters of foster carers can perform, and ensure that they are provided with relevant information. It was evident that those children and young people who had received relevant information developed a significantly better relationship with foster children.

Foster carers need to identify 'protected' time for their children

In many of the studies, children and young people suggested that their parents became extensively involved in their fostering task. They stated that their parents spent insufficient time with them and were unable to listen to them adequately due to the demands of fostering. Sometimes children and young people said that they felt excluded in the family and forgotten by their parents. They acknowledged the importance of the fostering task and that their parents had to give adequate attention to the foster children, but they can still feel left out.

Limiting information and sensitive information

Some of the participants in the studies were of the opinion that they did not want too much information – this was more common among the younger children. Some of the participants did not want to be too involved, because to be involved also implied responsibility. There were examples from studies in which both children of foster carers, and the carers themselves, found that children sometimes have to process information about abuse, neglect and violence that was very challenging.

Being allowed to discuss problems

Other important messages from the research on sons and daughters of foster carers reflected the significant changes in everyday life that fostering brings about in the family. These changes involved both positive and negative aspects. Examples of negative aspects were sharing of parents' time with potentially less attention from parents, sharing of belongings, less personal space and having to cope with difficult behaviour from foster children. Some children and young people said they really resented these negative aspects of fostering although many seemed able to cope.

One factor improving the capacity to cope was the opportunity to have open discussions about perceived difficulties, primarily with their parents, but also with social workers. If children and young people were allowed to complain about the things they find problematic with fostering and were enabled to display negative feelings, they were better equipped to cope with problems. Some children and young people who participated in the studies said that they did not want to trouble their parents with their own difficulties, and some also had a notion that they were not 'eligible' to complain.

Preparing carers' children for ending of placements

Providing information and talking to all members of the foster family is also of great importance when a placement ends. Some children and young people stated that the ending of placements was the most difficult aspect of fostering. There were several examples from the studies in which sons and daughters of foster carers felt that they had not been informed when a child moved from the family, and their feelings of grief and loss were not recognised.

¹ www.fostering.net/all-about-fostering/sons-daughters

Recommendations for policy and practice

Engaging foster carers' children in the fostering process

Foster carers should consider how their children could be involved in discussions and decisions about starting to foster. Fostering services should encourage this by ensuring they are listened to, and particularly that they are recognised as potential active caregivers.

Ensuring foster carers' children are well informed

Fostering services should review current practices in order to improve information and support to carers' children to ensure that they are well informed. Some fostering providers distribute information packs or hold information sessions for children in families starting to foster but this is not consistently provided and rarely evaluated. However, social workers and foster carers need to listen to children and young people, and be sensitive to what kind of information they require.

Foster carers' children need on-going support

Support groups for carers' children can provide an important means of enabling them to cope with on-going challenges, and the benefits of these groups should be evaluated. Children of foster carers, who have had experiences of fostering, can make an important contribution to these groups.

Foster carers and social workers need to give carers' children the licence to discuss difficulties

Carers' children need open discussions about perceived difficulties, primarily with their parents, (which may need to be facilitated by social workers), but also with social workers or support workers. These opportunities need to make it possible for children and young people to reveal their feelings about fostering and receive acceptance when they are negative towards foster children and to fostering. Such open discussions can make it easier for children and young people to cope and to understand their own feelings.

Protected parenting time for carers' children

Foster carers need to find time to spend exclusively with their own children, and social workers and support workers need to support foster carers to make this possible, sometimes through respite arrangements for the foster child. The competing demands on foster carers must be recognised in the process of trying to establish this time, but without it there is strong evidence of carers' children feeling isolated and left out. However, it should be acknowledged that fostered children sometimes feel that the carers' children are treated differently and so this balancing of parenting time must be handled sensitively.

Training and professional development

These implications, and in particular the importance of listening to foster carers' and children's concerns, need to be included in training and the professional development of social workers and school staff.



Recommendations for research

The studies in this review were generally qualitative, small scale and depended on the retrospective perceptions of carers and their children. Future research should therefore provide:

- Larger scale studies of the perspectives of carers' children that seek to identify the benefits and risks of fostering to carers' children. This might for example build on earlier studies reviewed here by linking the fostered child and fostering family characteristics and perspectives (e.g. gender, disability, ethnicity, family structure, parenting style) to specific outcomes such as carer retention, placement stability and educational outcomes of both the fostered and carers' children;
- Evaluations of interventions designed to increase the benefits and reduce the disadvantages of fostering for carers' children including, for example, the provision of information packs, support groups, campaigns and specific strategies adopted by social workers and support workers to acknowledge these children's role in the fostering process;
- Evaluated interventions targeting the potential for foster carers' children to play a role in the preparation of children or young people who are to be fostered by their family, or in mentoring fostered children or carers' children from other families;
- Prospective, longitudinal studies of carers' children that track their experiences from their parents' initial discussions about fostering through their experiences with subsequent foster children placed in their home. Complementary studies could engage adults whose families fostered in reflecting on the longer term effects including whether they are more social and resilient citizens, whether a higher proportion are employed in social care and educational roles, and the proportion that themselves become foster carers.

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

Table 1: Details of studies included in the review

| Reference | Country | Number of participants | Methodology |
|---|---------|--|--|
| Amorós, Palacios, Fuentes, León and Mesas, 2003 | Spain | 89 foster families | Questionnaire Interview |
| Denuwelaere and Bracke, 2007 | Belgium | 384 from 100 families Foster carers' children, foster parents, foster child | Questionnaire Self esteem scale Self-efficacy test/self report form Child behaviour checklist |
| Fox, 2001 | UK | 8 Foster carers' children | Interview |
| Höjer and Nordenfors, 2004, 2006 Höjer, 2007 | Sweden | 684 questionnaire 17 focus groups 16 discussion groups 8 in-depth interviews Foster carers' children | Questionnaire Focus group Discussion group Interview |
| Martin, 1993 | UK | 7 Foster carers' children 1 Focus group | Longitudinal – met regularly over 1.5 years |
| Part, 1993 | UK | 75 Foster carers' children | Questionnaire |
| Poland and Groze, 1993 | US | 51 Foster carers' children 52 Foster carers | Questionnaire |
| Pugh, 1996 | UK | 9 Foster carers' children 4 Foster carers | Interview |
| Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson, 2004 | UK | 944 Foster carers | Questionnaire with follow up after 19 months. Study of carer retention. |
| Sinclair, Wilson and Gibbs, 2005 | UK | 495 Foster carers 908 Social workers 150 Foster children 24 Case studies | Questionnaires Case studies Study of placements |
| Spears and Cross, 2003 | UK | 20 Foster carers' children | Interview |
| Sutton and Stack, 2013 | UK | 6 Foster carers' children | Interview |
| Swan, 2002 | Canada | 12 interviews 19 focus groups Foster carers' children | Interview Focus group |
| Twigg, 1994 Twigg, 1995 | Canada | 8 Foster carers' children 8 family interviews | Interview |
| Walsh and Campbell, 2010 | UK | 14 Foster carers 28 Foster carers' children | Questionnaires Digital voting |
| Watson and Jones, 2002 | UK | 6 Foster carers' children pilot 116 Foster carers' children questionnaire | Questionnaire |
| Younes and Harp, 2007 | US | 10 Foster carers 16 Foster carers' children | Interview |

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