

Summary

Knowledge review 5: Fostering success

An exploration of the research literature in foster care

social care
institute for excellence



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More than half of all the children who are looked after in the UK are cared for by foster carers. This review looks at what research has found out about the outcomes, or consequences of foster care for the many children and young people who experience it.

The authors – from the Universities of Nottingham, York, Cardiff and East Anglia – also worked with three consultation groups of foster carers and young people throughout the study, and the quotes are from them.

“It’s, like, foster care, ... it works differently for different people. It goes well for some people, it doesn’t for others.” (young person)

- The main focus of the research review is on the results that foster care creates for fostered children and young people – in other words, the effects on their lives that would not have happened without it.
- For many children and young people in long-term foster care, being fostered may be better than the obvious alternative, that is, remaining at home.
- Importantly, despite initial difficulties on leaving care, the majority of fostered children go on to lead happy, healthy, productive lives as adults.
- Most foster children are generally positive about the care they receive.
- Foster children do not all say that they want the same things, but they have common needs: for a normal family life, encouragement, respect, basic information about what they are entitled to, a good education and choice about contact with their own families.
- Most also want a say about their time in care and what they want from it.
- How satisfied they are depends on:
 - > the care they receive from their foster families;
 - > their relationship with their own, birth families;
 - > the balance of their relationships with their foster and their own families;
 - > the reasons for their being in care;
 - > having lives in care which are predictable and stable; and
 - > being able to lead an ordinary life.

“I think if you did this for the money, you’d give up! You can do jobs where you get back home, and leave it behind. But this – you’ve got it there 24 hours a day.” (foster carer)

- The key to successful foster care lies in recruiting, training and supporting good foster carers.

- Word-of-mouth, the involvement of foster carers in recruitment campaigns, small cash incentives and focusing on particular groups (of black and minority ethnic woman for example) work best in the recruitment of foster carers.
- Looking at children's views and other research about the results of fostering together, the review recommends that local authorities should:
 - > have a clear system for getting feedback from children, birth families, foster carers and social workers about the service they provide, and acting on it;
 - > provide enough choice of placements and a varied and flexible service, such as helping young people to stay with their carers beyond the age of 18; and/or developing foster care services that support the whole family;
 - > develop plans with the children, plans that recognise that their own birth families play a key role in children's lives;
 - > deal properly with children's needs in foster care, paying close attention to the areas of education, behaviour and the child's understanding of her/his history.

"In a children's home, it's like, staff in and out, isn't it? ... And I prefer to be in a foster home, because then you've got two parents there for you 24/7." (young person)

Introduction

On any one day, over 75,000 children are looked after by local authorities in the UK – more than half of them in foster care.

This review will be of interest to local policy makers and practitioners, and to people planning, commissioning or doing research in this field. It is about the outcomes for children that are a direct result of foster care. The review identifies messages for policy and practice and asks how we know whether an outcome or consequence of foster care is really caused by it

This summary covers three broad issues:

- **Background:** what are fostered children like? Why are they fostered? How do they get on in life? What is foster care meant to do for them? How should we assess its outcomes?
- **The overall effect of foster care:** do children on average do better if they are fostered than they would have without it?
- **Differences within foster care:** given that a child or young person is fostered, what makes for a better or worse outcome?

Background

Foster children have difficult early lives. Their needs are great, their educational performance can be poor, their childhoods in foster care and out of it are often unstable. In their adult lives they are at greater risk than others of a wide variety of difficulties. These 'facts' have led some to conclude that the state is not an adequate parent. This conclusion, however, ignores two

possibilities. First, foster care may be better than the obvious alternative – remaining at home. Second, the lives of fostered children clearly can turn out well. Maybe this could become true for more of them.

Types of foster care

Local authorities classify foster care in a wide variety of different ways: for example, short-term care may be used in an emergency, or while the needs of a child are investigated. Shared care involves regular short breaks with a foster family, and medium-term care may be for treatment, preparation for independence or adoption, and so on. Long-term foster care means that the young person effectively grows up in foster care.

The outcomes of these different kinds of foster care are clearly different: no one expects short-term care on its own to change a child's education, mental health or behaviour; rather it is a form of family support for families in need. Most research and official writing on the outcomes of foster care has therefore focused on medium or longer-term fostering.

A child's time in care

Foster children who have problems in later life – such as mental health problems – often also have been moved between foster placements. But it is not known whether these are a result of foster care itself, or reflect their previous difficulties.

Children and young people crave stability. For foster children, their time in care can be characterised by frequent moves. Nevertheless some moves (for example, those which involve the breakdown of long-term placements) are more serious than others, some children want to be moved and some moves may be necessary to maintain a relationship with carers, even if at a distance.

Research has shown that long-term foster care can be an important option for children. But the combination of returning children home, placement breakdowns in teenage years and reluctance to encourage stays beyond the age of 18 mean that long stays with the same foster carer are rare.

Life as adults

In general, the evidence suggests that those who have spent time in the care system have to cope on their own at a much earlier age, and face difficulties over loneliness, unemployment, drug use, mental health problems, debt and imprisonment. But longer-term follow-ups suggest that many of those in difficulty immediately on leaving care are subsequently able to settle down, even re-establishing friendly contact with foster families after breakdown. It is probably only under a third who face serious long-term difficulties.

What is the overall effect of foster care?

Young people often have problems when they leave foster care. Is that the fault of foster care itself? The research evidence suggests that the answer to this question appears to be 'no'. Foster care seems to be in general safer and less likely to produce difficult behaviour and emotional problems than care in children's homes. It is welcomed by most of its users.

Some people feel that removing a child to the care system is in some sense a failure, and they could argue that we need more evidence on what leaving their own family does to a child's long-term sense of identity. But the balance of the evidence here is against their view.

What, on average, are the effects of different kinds of foster care?

- Short-term foster care or short break foster care is generally valuable and valued. It is an important way of supporting the child and his/her family.
- Longer-term placements should be judged by a variety of criteria, including achievement of close relationships, the effects on the child's development, on educational performance and on young people's sense of identity.
- Other findings from the research include:
 - > there is a relatively high incidence of abuse among foster children, but this does not necessarily mean that they are abused because they are fostered
 - > problems with mental health, behaviour and education are not caused by foster care
 - > all things being equal, adoption may be preferred to long-term fostering since it offers adopted children greater emotional security, sense of well-being and belonging
 - > there may be scope for a slight increase in adoption through greater decisiveness when the child is very young or by greater encouragement of the use of foster carer adoptions among older children
 - > almost all foster children who have been asked prefer foster care to residential care.

Most young people who have been in foster care want the chance to talk about their experience, and they should be listened to. They also want a say in how their time in care is planned and develops. Whether they are satisfied or not depends on the kind of care they receive from their foster families, and on their relationship with their own families.

What makes a difference to outcomes in foster care?

There is evidence of substantial differences between the different types of foster care provider in terms of the support available for carers. But there is no firm evidence that one type of provider is more effective than another.

Evidence from the US and (less so) the UK suggests that well-planned foster care schemes that include the intensive support and training of both carers, social workers, and where appropriate, birth parents, can produce good results.

Children have a right to contact with birth families, but thought must be given to its purpose, type and frequency of contact and it is good practice to get an accurate picture of children's views of different family members, and assess any risk posed by each.

The outcomes of foster care are determined by a variety of factors, including:

- recruiting, training and supporting good foster carers
- the characteristics of the foster carer
- the birth parents and their contact with the foster child
- support and interventions by social workers
- the school to which the child goes and their experience there
- the degree to which child and placement are 'matched'.

To this list, it is accurate to add how well the placement process was handled, such as, whether circumstances meant that the placement was made in a hurry.

Recruiting, training and supporting good foster carers

The key to successful foster care lies in recruiting, training and supporting good foster carers. Loss of foster carers is quite low – 10% or less a year – which probably reflects the high level of commitment that carers have to their foster children and the fulfilment that they get from caring. Success in recruitment and retention is likely to require:

- recruitment strategies based on rapid and efficient response to interest backed by exposure to enthusiastic carers
- support which is tailored to the carer's situation, based on regular social work support, 'professional' packages of relevant training, contact with other carers, adequate remuneration, good out-of-hours services and sensitive responses to distressing events.

An adequate system for recruiting, training and supporting foster carers is likely to include:

- a fast response to enquiries
- using foster carers in recruitment and training
- making use of word-of-mouth and features in local papers for recruitment
- dealing efficiently with administrative and payment issues
- responding quickly when relationships break down and supporting both the child and carer individually
- a clear policy on the financial and other support of 'kinship' carers
- providing specialist training and concentrated support for foster carers who take children needing treatment or special care.

Types of foster care provider

Foster care providers include family and friends, local authority or independent agencies, for example, for-profit and voluntary organisations as well private foster carers. Research on kinship care – that is, care by family and friends other than birth parents – suggests that kinship carers may face particular problems arising from inadequate support, difficulties over finance, and problematic contact with birth parents. These factors may impact on outcomes for children and young people.

Contact with birth families

Contact is a key issue for both children and their birth families. In general most children want it, and are entitled to have it. However, the impact of contact on good outcomes is more problematic than previously thought, and, in some cases, may be associated with abuse and placement breakdown. There is some evidence to suggest that sensitive and empathic thinking by social workers and involving fosters carers is vital in helping children make sense of their family relationships. When these attributes were present, a wide range of contact arrangements could be successful.

Role of social workers

The role of social workers in foster care is central:

- in making professional judgements about the best kind of placement for the child, and how it should be managed (for example, contact arrangements with birth families)
- in recruiting and providing support and advice to foster carers
- in working directly with children
- intervening when the foster carer and the child start to fall out.

The effect of much of this activity is therefore implicit in other outcome measures, for example, on the impact on a placement of terminating contact, and is in itself difficult to measure. One study found that foster carers value social workers who are reliable, easy to get hold of, efficient in chasing payments and complaints, responsive to the family's needs and circumstances, and attend to the individual child's needs and interests and involve the foster carers where appropriate.

The experience of school

Although the evidence on the factors that help foster children do well at school is not always strong, there is no doubt that school is a key arena for them. Everything possible should be done to ensure that they are successful and happy there, are not bullied and take part in school activities that they enjoy and which can be sources of self-esteem. Foster parents can provide encouragement, through, for example, attending school events. Contact with an educational psychologist or with dedicated teachers involved in working with children to return them to school can also be successful.

'Matching' the child with the foster family

Researchers and practitioners have often drawn on rules of thumb for working out which child will do well with which foster carer. In practice the research evidence for 'matching' children is poor. There are two general conclusions:

- that local authorities need to recruit short-term carers who are prepared to take a wide variety of children for varying lengths of time
- that placing siblings together and minority ethnic children with minority ethnic parents is right in principle, but professional judgement should still be exercised in individual cases.

Conclusion: principles behind service provision

The evidence that exists of what makes foster care work well or badly agrees with what is known about what helps children cope well in difficult situations.

Studies of resilience – the factors that make children able to survive difficult circumstances – highlight as significant the child's temperament; the availability of at least one close relationship; feeling happy and involved at school (together with the opportunities that come with school); and the availability of breaks from difficult home circumstances, and, in some cases, a chance to make a new start. Foster care should be able to provide these opportunities.

Fostering success is dependent on ensuring that foster children have the opportunities to live with committed, caring foster carers, are themselves happy at school and – probably – are protected from contacts with family that might damage them. This includes supporting foster children and young people to choose outcomes that reflect their own aspirations and desires as well as ensuring that every effort is made to enable young people achieve them.

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