

## Good practice in parent and child fostering

Dr Nikki Luke, Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of  
Oxford

Paul Adams, CoramBAAF

### Summary

Parent and child fostering is a specialist fostering arrangement which can be used to support and/or assess vulnerable parents. This can include parents whose custody of a child is under threat or teenagers who become parents while already living in care. Identifying the effective aspects of parent and child fostering is important in order to improve services and increase the chance of successful outcomes.

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Parent and child fostering has emerged to offer something different from traditional fostering, in that it allows babies and infants who might be at risk to remain living with their parent or parents, in the context of a foster home. This brings a number of obvious benefits in terms of providing a safe environment for the child without disrupting the interactions with their parents that will hopefully lead to secure attachments and optimal development.

Adams and Dibben (2011) identify two main types of parent and child fostering that overlap in some ways, but with each having a distinct purpose and being suitable for different situations. The first type is primarily for the purposes of assessment and will usually take place over a set period (such as 12 weeks) resulting in a report that is presented to court. This type of parent and child fostering will be most appropriate in cases where the child is subject to a court order and decisions need to be made about the capacity of the parent to care for them effectively and safely. In most cases the parent will have previously been living in the community prior to the risk being identified, and the assessment will be carried out by professionals other than the foster carer, making use of the carer's observations and written records.

The second main type of fostering is described as a support arrangement where the emphasis is on supporting and helping the parent rather than assessing them, and this approach is most appropriate where the risks are assessed as being lower and it is anticipated that the parent will continue to care for the child. These arrangements are most likely to be used with young mothers where the foster carers can take on an educative and nurturing role, and in some cases will be used with young women who are themselves in foster care at the time they become pregnant. Where the emphasis is on support rather than assessment the arrangement is likely not to be time limited, or at least the time period will be lengthy.

For both types of parent and child fostering the foster carers will have been assessed and approved under the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended) and will be registered with either a local authority fostering service or with an Independent Fostering Provider. The assessment process takes approximately eight months from application and concludes with a decision after the application has been considered by a fostering panel made up of different professionals and lay people. Foster carers will be provided with pre-approval and post-approval training and will be allocated a supervising social worker to monitor and support them as they take up their fostering responsibilities.

The prevalence of parent and child fostering has not always been easy to determine. While there is limited academic research on parenting rates amongst those in care in the UK (Fallon et al., 2015), Department for Education statistics in England (DfE, 2017) show that the rate of motherhood amongst girls in care aged 12 and over has fallen slightly in recent years, from 2.5% in 2013 to 1.7% in 2017. In the US, there is no federal requirement to report on parenthood amongst young people in care (Dworsky, 2015), but Svoboda et al.'s (2012) review revealed pregnancy and parenting rates of upward of 16% of adolescents in foster care. Care experienced young parents are only part of the picture, however, and statistics for England (Ofsted, 2017) show that on 31st March 2016, there were 235 current parent and child fostering arrangements. This was the first year that such data were published. It has been suggested that demand for parent and child placements is on the rise (Tickle, 2017), with 57% of fostering services surveyed by a UK charity expressing a need for carers who specialise in this area (The Fostering Network, 2017).

Young people in care who become parents before or shortly after leaving care represent only a subset of one type of parent and child fostering; yet more is known about this group than about the parents who enter foster homes with their children from the community for assessment and support. A recent review (Luke & Sebba, 2014) found more studies on teenagers in care who become parents than on adult parents who move into foster homes with their children. The review showed that many things young parents need are the same as for any young person in fostering: a good relationship with foster carers and social workers, clear house rules, a stable living arrangement, help with substance abuse (where this is an issue), and to have their say in decisions made about their future. However, it showed that young parents in fostering also have some unique needs, including: a clear understanding about the foster carer's role in assessing the parent's ability to look after their child; an understanding of how much the foster carer will help look after the child; and the chance to be teenagers, for example by the foster carer babysitting occasionally so they can go out with friends. Young parents said that they felt that they were under constant scrutiny, and feared having their child taken away. Parents in foster homes felt their relationship with social workers suffered because they didn't see them often enough or get enough support from them. Leaving care teams, on the other hand, were seen as being more supportive. Finally, young parents leaving foster homes often felt there wasn't enough support after they had left.

For the current article, we ran an updated search for evidence on effective parent and child fostering, using the search terms and sources from the Luke and Sebba (2014) review. We looked for any published research on 'good practice' in parent and child fostering and, more broadly, on the parents' experiences of this type of arrangement. The scope of our search did not include how to assess parenting capacity for the parents of children in/on the edge of care (for a recent review of the literature on this topic, see Ward et al., 2014); nor did it include the factors predicting pregnancy for those in care (e.g. see Fallon et al., 2015; Svoboda et al., 2012). Although our search allowed for any evaluations of parenting interventions focusing on those in fostering arrangements, we could find only reviews evaluating programmes for teenage parents more generally (e.g. Finigan-Carr et al., 2015). As Fallon et al. (2015) point out, this is more likely to reflect a lack of published evaluation work, rather than a gap in practice.

The Luke and Sebba (2014) review found only a small number of studies focusing on aspects of the parent and child arrangement for those entering foster homes from the community; none of those studies examined the parents' attitudes towards parenthood, or their views on what made a difference. Our updated search was no more successful in this respect. We uncovered 10 additional studies published between 2014-2017, all concerning young parents who were in care or who had recently left care.

The new studies all originated in the US. Research designs ranged from small-scale qualitative interview studies (e.g. Aparicio et al., 2015; Radey et al., 2017), through to large-scale quantitative analyses of administrative data (e.g. Dworsky, 2015). Administrative data methods allow for large numbers but are restricted to predicting outcomes from available variables (e.g. number of placements) rather than qualities of the parent and child placement. In contrast, qualitative studies gather parents' experiences of the placements and what they felt worked well or hindered their parenting, but suffer from small sample sizes and retrospective designs. Although small in numbers, the samples used in the studies cited here generally represent a range of foster care experiences (e.g. age at earliest placement, number of foster care placements experienced). Fathers are under-represented across all the studies on this topic.

### **The rewards and challenges of parenting**

As in the previous review (Luke & Sebba, 2014), young parents in the new studies articulated the positive and negative aspects of the parenting role. Interviewees talked about the joys of being a parent, with children providing a source of happiness (Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Many young people had meaningful relationships with their children, who often represented their first experience of unconditional love (Aparicio et al., 2015).

A common theme across interview studies was the desire of young parents to provide a better life for their children than they themselves had experienced, both in emotional and material terms. Aparicio (2017) captured the attempts made by young parents to parent differently by treating their children well. The mothers discussed

daily efforts such as making choices about how to parent, including how to discipline their children. They also described making very real sacrifices. This was echoed by interviewees in Radey et al.'s (2016) study, who turned down party invitations to look after their child; and those interviewed by Schelbe and Geiger (2017), who described attending high school and employment that they hated in order to show their children what they could achieve and to provide for their futures. Choosing to parent differently was seen as a source of strength by the mothers in Aparicio's (2017) study. Both Aparicio (2017) and Radey et al. (2016) discuss how this choice benefits not only the children, but also the mothers themselves, as it helps them to work through their own experiences of maltreatment.

Parenthood can also offer young people in care a sense of a 'new beginning' (Aparicio et al., 2015), offering a sense of motivation and purpose. Young parents said they felt motivated to set goals and take on more responsibilities, particularly around education, employment, and housing (Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Despite this sense of motivation, fostering providers were more pessimistic about young parents' chances of success (Radey et al., 2016).

Undoubtedly, young parents with care experience faced some tough challenges. Aparicio et al.'s (2015) interviewees reflected on their birth parents' substance abuse as a choice over taking care of their children, which continued to affect their relationship. They had also experienced homelessness, as well as a sense of not belonging once they were in care. Unpredictable placement moves made it difficult to develop a sense of stability and security for the young mothers and their children. Parents' own experiences of entering care added to a sense of being scrutinised by social care providers, leading to a common fear amongst parents across that studies that their children might be removed from them and placed in foster care (e.g. Aparicio, 2017; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Hirst and Jones (2016) point out that services may unwittingly be biased in their judgements about the parenting capacity of care experienced young people because they have access to background information they would not possess for parents without care experience, for example when interpreting current behaviour through an awareness of the parent's own traumatic history.

## **Parenting outcomes**

Four studies reported on outcomes for care experienced young parents, but without making specific links to the characteristics of any fostering arrangements that might help us to identify good practice. Dworsky (2015) used administrative data from Illinois to show that for children whose parents were in foster care when they were born, 39% later became the subject of at least one investigation by Child Protective Services (CPS), and 11% had at least one care placement before their fifth birthday. A greater risk of CPS involvement was linked to higher numbers of placement changes while in care, running away from placements, parenting at a younger age, and entering care shortly before the child's birth. Dworsky and Gitlow (2017) used the same administrative data source to examine employment outcomes among young parents ageing out of foster care. They found that only half of the parents were employed at any point during the first year after exiting care. Employment was inconsistent and earnings were generally very low.

Hook and Courtney (2013) studied father-child contact for 26-year-old care leavers and found a positive relationship between remaining in foster care after age 18 and levels of father-child contact. This relationship was partly explained by those who remained in care being more likely to be employed and co-reside with the child's mother, and being less likely to have a criminal conviction.

Finally, Jackson Foster et al. (2015) explored the links between mental health issues in the parents of young people in care, the mental health of the young people themselves, and the subsequent likelihood of their own children being taken into care. They found that poorer functioning in birth fathers predicted depression in care leavers; this in turn was linked to less social support, which predicted a greater likelihood of young parents' children being taken into care. Other links between the mental health of birth parent and young people were also significant (e.g. poorer mental health in mothers was associated with post-traumatic stress disorder in young people), but these did not predict children's placement in care.

## **The needs of parents**

Across the studies, young parents identified a common set of needs during and after their time in foster care. Reflecting the themes in the Luke and Sebba (2014) review, these centred on social, emotional, and practical support. Interviewees noted the lack of supportive relationships in their lives, with parents raising children with little or no support from biological or foster families (e.g. Radey et al., 2016; Shelbe & Geiger, 2017). Young fathers' families were sometimes viewed as sources of support (Aparicio et al., 2015; Radey et al., 2016), offering temporary housing and babysitting. However, young mothers whose relationships with the child's father had deteriorated faced a dilemma: stand up for themselves and show that the father's behaviour towards them was unacceptable, or accept the father's negative treatment to maintain a father-child relationship that they themselves had never enjoyed (Aparicio et al., 2015; Schelbe and Geiger, 2017).

The issue of trust appears to be central. Young mothers interviewed by Aparicio (2017) stressed the importance of reaching out to someone they trusted to discuss their parenting stresses. Interviewees discussed the need for foster carers to be sensitive to young people's moods, and to instill the value of talking to someone – whether themselves or another professional. There was some evidence that young mothers in kinship care felt they had a more trusting relationship with their carers than did those in non-kinship foster care, and that this was related to lower levels of depressive symptoms (Wilson et al., 2017). Radey et al. (2017) argued that a lack of trust in service providers might help to explain why care experienced young mothers were not capitalising on the resources that providers felt they were offering. Some interviewees (e.g. Aparicio, 2017; Radey et al., 2016) said that therapy or counselling could help them be better parents, but there was also a sense of stigma about seeking therapeutic interventions. Participants also said that alternative therapeutic approaches such as art therapy might be more beneficial than traditional 'talking' therapies, but that they were less readily available.

More practical guidance on parenting was also identified as a key need. Most interviewees knew what not to do from their own childhood experiences, but struggled to know what they should be doing instead (Aparicio et al., 2015; Radey et al., 2016; Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Young mothers said they found parenting classes and other courses that helped with daily living useful (Aparicio, 2017). Mentoring was important for Aparicio's (2017) interviewees, with foster carers and

'othermothers' (Aparicio et al., 2015) providing support with the added benefit of modelling 'healthy' parenting experiences. Despite being seen as essential, service providers recognise that mentors are often unavailable (Radey et al., 2016).

Other forms of practical support were also needed. The young mothers in Aparicio et al.'s (2015) study struggled to make ends meet, echoing their own childhood experiences. Sometimes they took the difficult decision to have their children stay with other family members, where there were more resources, but which meant separation of mother and child. Childcare was especially challenging, and some parents had difficulty getting and maintaining jobs if reliable childcare was not available (Radey et al., 2016); Schelbe & Geiger, 2017). Issues that are common amongst young care leavers – around access to quality housing and financial support – were especially challenging for young parents in these studies. Almost all of Schelbe and Geiger's (2017) interviewees lived in poverty, often in rough neighbourhoods that threatened their future lives with their children.

Finally, one study identified an important parenting need that did not arise in the Luke and Sebba (2014) review. Participants in Aparicio et al.'s (2015) study believed strongly in the importance of education as a source of empowerment for change, particularly given their own parents' poor educational histories. They recognised the role of education in securing a better future for them and their children, and made efforts to use alternative educational methods such as night school, online courses, and summer school, that could fit around their family commitments. Some participants identified individual educators who had pushed them to stay in school.

### **Limitations of the research**

The small scale of many qualitative studies limits their generalisability to other contexts, and most interview studies are retrospective, which may bias interpretations of events and placement characteristics. One exception comes from Hook and Courtney (2013), whose substantial longitudinal sample of care leavers were first interviewed at age 17, before fatherhood. For the purposes of the current article, however, this paper still focused on the factors with parenting, rather than on what makes a good fostering arrangement for parents. In general, there is also a

lack of research using comparison groups. A comparative design adopted in one study of group homes (Lieberman et al., 2015) enabled the authors to show that pregnant teenagers resident in a home which offered enhanced options such as career planning, peer mentoring, and mental health support, experienced greater improvements in career development and sexual and mental health than parents in a comparison home which did not offer these options. Similar designs are needed to examine the links between measurable characteristics of individual foster placements and parenting outcomes.

### **Good practice recommendations**

Luke and Sebba (2014) highlighted the dearth of research evidence identifying links between the characteristics of parent and child fostering arrangements and successful outcomes. The 10 new studies included in the current article offer some additions to this knowledge, though as before, these are largely in terms of the qualitative recollections of care experienced young parents. Participants in Aparicio et al.'s (2015) study outlined the positive aspects of being in foster care, including the provision of emotional and material support. They acknowledged that although they might not have appreciated this at the time, their feelings about foster care had changed since they had become mothers and left the care system. However, some foster carers had tried to take over caring for the child, which was not helpful; and at the other extreme, some carers remained uninvolved, leaving the young mothers with a crushing sense of responsibility. The same study identified a promising avenue for improving outcomes via supporting opportunities for parents to engage with education. The centrality of trust for young parents suggests that providing young parents with opportunities to build trusting relationships – for example, with peer mentors – might help to promote successful outcomes (Radey et al., 2017). And Hook and Courtney's (2013) use of administrative data suggests that extending care from age 18 to 21 may benefit those young men who become fathers, with subsequent benefits for the children themselves.

Given the scarcity of empirical evidence on effective practice to date – particularly for parents entering foster homes from the community – our recommendations for parent and child fostering are based on practice wisdom. They are drawn from the

practitioner focus groups run by Adams and Dibben (2011), and outline a number of features of good practice that were identified as supporting good outcomes in parent and child fostering. In keeping with Luke and Sebba (2014), we also call for further research to test out these recommendations against parenting outcomes using robust methodological designs.

- It is important that parents are properly prepared in advance of moving into a parent and child fostering placement. They will need to be provided with full information about what this entails, and the expectations of them in that setting. Ideally parents should be provided with written information in advance, and should be invited to a placement planning meeting to discuss all aspects of the arrangement.
- Moving into a foster home is not easy for an adult (or a child) and having another adult live in your home is not easy for the foster carer. There are numerous areas for potential conflict and good practice demands that these are discussed at the outset and some ground rules agreed. These ground rules should cover day-to-day matters such as responsibility for childcare, any agreements around baby-sitting, and being clear about financial responsibility for the things that the child will need including food and nappies. Smoking can be an issue that creates particular problems and so needs to be considered at an early stage, as do arrangements for visitors or having contact with others who might potentially be a risk to the child.
- The success or otherwise of a parent and child arrangement will largely depend on the relationship between the foster carer and the parent. Many of the parents who end up in these foster homes will have had troubled backgrounds, and may only be there because the alternative is having their child removed. Anxious or angry parents are unlikely to welcome advice and guidance in this context, and foster carers will need to be able to advise sensitively and patiently, and praise in a way that is not experienced as patronising or arrogant. Effective foster carers will get the balance between maintaining professional boundaries and coming across as warm and caring.

- The most successful parent and child foster placements will be those where the parent improves their parenting capacity and/or develops into a confident and capable parent. This will be largely influenced by the extent to which the carer is able to promote and encourage good parenting, including through role modelling.
- At the same time as being supportive the foster carer will need to prioritise the safety of the child and will need to make calm, confident and objective judgements about this, being assertive with parents as necessary. The importance of this cannot be overstated.
- Unlike with other fostering, in parent and child fostering the foster carer's role is not to be providing direct care to the child, but instead to be helping the parent to do this effectively and safely. Good practice requires foster carers to be able to step back and accept 'good enough' parenting even if it falls short of their own higher standards. Parents who find themselves in these foster homes for assessment purposes will be struggling to parent their child – they wouldn't otherwise be there – and foster carers need to be realistic and accepting of what is 'good enough' rather than perfect or even good.
- Another good practice feature is the need for honesty with parents. Foster carers and other professionals need to be clear with parents about what is going well and what is not. There will be a requirement to keep written records and these might be used in court if it is deemed that the quality of parenting is inadequate. Best practice requires that parents get to read these records and have an opportunity to comment on what is being said about them.
- While it is always sad when a parent is incapable of meeting their child's needs, it is nevertheless better that this is identified at an earlier rather than later stage. The longer a child remains in a setting where their needs are not being met, the more likely that their development will be impaired. In this context a parent and child foster home can make a positive contribution to reaching a timely assessment of a parent's capacity, allowing the child to

move to a more positive parenting environment (adoption or fostering) where their developmental needs can be met.

- Planning for endings is also important, and while the nature of this will differ depending on the placement type, it is something that needs to be addressed from the outset. This will include consideration of what might happen if the arrangement was to break down in an unplanned way; deciding who would look after the child and where the parent would live. It also needs to consider the importance to the parent of establishing supportive networks outside of the foster home and engaging in meaningful activity such as education and employment.

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