

# Policy Paper



## **Fostering Families:** supporting sons and daughters of foster carers

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the fostering network  
the voice of foster care



# Policy Paper

## **Fostering Families – supporting the sons and daughters of foster carers**

Go for it. It's difficult but very satisfying. Be aware that it's not easy but it's good.

*I would tell [other children] it is a good thing [to foster] but you must know that you will not get as much attention as you used to get. You need to be well prepared and talk about anything bothering you with your family. It could mean taking up a huge responsibility.*

Make sure your children understand and are ready to foster. It is very difficult for them to share their lives and they need a lot of reassurance. Also make sure you have time to spend with your children so they know they can come to you with any problems and you are never too busy.

Statements made by sons and daughters of foster carers in research project

## Introduction

The Fostering Network has long acknowledged the vital role that the sons and daughters of foster carers play in fostering. Through a range of work we have gained a broad knowledge of the issues faced by them. This work has taken place across the four nations of the United Kingdom and has included running specialist projects, producing publications<sup>1</sup>, working with a group of sons and daughters to produce a video<sup>2</sup>, holding conferences and other events, and conducting surveys. The issues that have been identified through our work are confirmed by the findings of the limited number of research studies that have addressed this aspect of foster care<sup>3</sup>.

This paper summarises the reasons why it is important to support the sons and daughters of foster carers and outlines the issues for them in terms of their relationships with fostered children, with their own parents and with the social work agencies. It makes the case for ensuring that the sons and daughters of foster carers are properly valued and recognised for the role that they play in fostering; that they are consulted and involved in decisions which affect them; and that they are provided with appropriate support services which promote their mental and physical well-being. When a positive and appropriate framework of support is in place for sons and daughters of foster carers, placements are more successful and less likely to break down.

### 1 Terminology and scope

For the purpose of this paper, we use the term *sons and daughters of foster carers* to mean those children born to or adopted by foster carers, or for whom foster carers have parental responsibility through some other court order (e.g. Special Guardianship Order). The circumstances of foster children placed on a permanent basis will vary, but in many situations they will see themselves, and be seen by other family members, as a full member of the family.

The focus of this paper is on those sons and daughters of foster carers who are solely living within the fostering household, not those who no longer live at home, nor extended family members such as grandchildren. Whilst some of the issues will be similar for grandchildren, they are not the same as the issues facing a child whose parents have become foster carers, and who are sharing a space with a fostered child on a full-time basis.

We have also decided not to consider the specific needs of the sons and daughters of kinship carers (whether or not they are approved foster carers) in this paper. Again, whilst some of the issues will be similar, there are significant differences for sons and daughters who may, for instance, have a cousin come to live with them, as opposed to a stranger, or indeed a stream of strangers, placed by a local authority as result of a care order. Some of the issues relating to kinship carers are discussed in Prepared to Care<sup>4</sup> and will be considered in our forthcoming Kinship Care Policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a, 2003b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Forgotten Voices, The Fostering Network (2006)

<sup>3</sup> For example, those cited in Sinclair (2005) and Twigg and Swan (2007)

<sup>4</sup> Butler (2007)

We have chosen not to use the term *children who foster*, although this is a familiar term to some, because it implies that the children share the responsibility for fostering. In fact, it is the parents who are the foster carers (with all the statutory responsibilities this status entails) and their children remain their children, but with a particular role to play in the fostering household.

## **2 The importance of supporting sons and daughters in the fostering process**

Foster care is the preferred form of placement provision for the overwhelming majority of children in public care across the United Kingdom. Foster care aims to give children a positive experience of family life and to avoid the difficulties which may arise from living in a residential setting. The stability of placements has been identified as a key factor in ensuring successful outcomes for children and various government targets have been introduced in order to minimise the number of moves they experience. For most children in public care, this will mean finding stability within a foster family. The sons and daughters of foster carers are a key component of the success of a placement and, therefore, are key to promoting positive outcomes for children in foster care.

Most sons and daughters state that they are happy fostering and recognise the benefits of the experience. There is evidence that a proportion of sons and daughters go on to become foster carers themselves or enter the caring professions and many feel that fostering enhances their social understanding, empathy and skills. In one survey, for example, a third of children said that they thought they would become foster carers when they were adults<sup>5</sup>. In a review of 14 studies involving the sons and daughters of foster carers every study showed that fostering had some positive impact on their lives<sup>6</sup>.

However, sons and daughters also report that the role involves substantial challenges for them and that some of their experiences are negative or difficult to handle. This mixture of positive and negative impacts has been described as 'living within a contradictory experience'<sup>7</sup>. The difficulty of dealing with the negative aspects of fostering can be compounded as sons and daughters tell us that, for a variety of reasons, they sometimes feel unable to discuss their concerns with their parents or feel that their parents don't fully appreciate their concerns.

Foster carers can also find that fostering is not without its dilemmas for them as parents. They want the best for their sons and daughters and also want to give of their best to the children they foster. They feel that fostering helps their sons and daughters to have a mature attitude to life and a sense of social concern. But they also sometimes feel guilty when their time and attention is focussed primarily on the needs of the children they foster<sup>8</sup>. The challenge for them lies in balancing the two sets of needs which may sometimes conflict.

Some studies have shown that foster carers who found that fostering was a difficult experience for their own children were more likely to give up<sup>9</sup>. Given that there is currently a shortage of foster carers across the United Kingdom, this gives an added impetus to

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<sup>5</sup> Watson, A. (2002)

<sup>6</sup> Twigg and Swan (2007)

<sup>7</sup> Nuske, (2004), p256

<sup>8</sup> Comments to author at Fostering Network Wales membership meeting on sons and daughters; March 2006

<sup>9</sup> Triseliotis, Walker and Hill (2000)

fostering services to provide adequate support to their sons and daughters in order to maximise the retention of the foster placements their families provide.

So, in order to promote successful placement outcomes and in order to retain foster carers (and potentially, to nurture future foster carers), fostering services need to support the sons and daughters of foster carers.

Fostering services also need to provide this support for the sake of the sons and daughters themselves. Public authorities have a general duty to safeguard and to promote the welfare of all children in their area. They have duties under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to consult children about decisions which affect them and to promote family life. Where their own actions in placing children cause difficulties or challenges for other children in that household, public authorities surely have a particular duty to support those children and to minimise any negative effects of their actions.

### **3 The challenges and dilemmas faced by the sons and daughters of foster carers**

The challenges and dilemmas faced by the sons and daughters of foster carers, as well as some of the benefits they experience, will inevitably differ depending on the age and understanding of the child involved, and will change over the lifetime of individual placements. They might usefully be considered in three groups:

- those arising from their relationship with the fostered children themselves
- those related to their own parents and family
- and those concerned with the social work agencies.<sup>10</sup>

#### **3.1 Relationships with fostered children**

For most sons and daughters of foster carers, their relationships with fostered children have many positive aspects. They gain companionship, friendship and a sense of self-worth in sharing their homes and themselves with children who need them. Some report enjoying helping to look after a baby or toddler, or the attention of an older young person whom their family is fostering. Where sons and daughters see fostered children benefiting from and appreciating what their family has to offer, they find this satisfying. Conversely, where fostered children don't appear to appreciate what the family has to offer them, the sons and daughters of foster carers can become disillusioned.

Where sons and daughters have established a close relationship with children who are fostered it can be very hard for them to see these children move on. Young people describe deep feelings of loss that often go unrecognised, and consequently they are left to deal with their grief unsupported.<sup>11</sup> One daughter of foster carers described it as follows

'[I don't like] having to lose children that have become like your own brothers and sisters. Often children may have lived with you for years and then they go with little or no further contact'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Based on Twigg and Swan (2007)

<sup>11</sup> Response from young people to consultation, Aug 08

<sup>12</sup> IFCO conference report, 1997

This can feel less stressful when information on how the child/young person is doing in their new placement is shared with them.

Some sons and daughters describe feeling a certain amount of pressure at always being expected to show new children how things work in their family and act as a good role model. They may also be expected to look after a child at the expense of their own relationships with their friends. This can be coupled with a sense of perceived unfairness when they feel that fostered children gain rewards for 'bad' behaviour (typically the reward being that their social worker takes them out for a burger!) or at the very least fostered children do not appear to receive the same disapprobation that sons and daughters would receive for the same behaviour. This can engender feelings of 'it's one rule for them and another for us'.

It is a benefit of fostering that many sons and daughters learn to share and not to be selfish. However, whilst many are willing to do this, it does also cause them difficulty from time to time. Many sons and daughters experience a lack of privacy. Just over a third of sons and daughters in a Fostering Network survey said that they were sharing a room because of fostering<sup>12</sup> and they find this particularly irritating. They lose the one place in the house where they can go to be alone and to 'get away from it all'. It can mean that it's difficult for them (and, indeed, for fostered children too) to invite their friends to stay over. It needs to be acknowledged that there cannot be hard and fast rules about whether children share rooms or not. Each case needs to be considered individually, and issues relating to culture, age and gender will all come into play when decisions are being made about sharing bedrooms.

'I don't want my friends to stay - there are two young kids in the room'<sup>13</sup>

Other aspects of sharing can also be problematic with most having experienced their possessions being damaged or stolen.

In some circumstances sons and daughters also find that sharing friends can upset their friendship group. They feel torn by, on the one hand, not wanting to exclude a fostered child and, on the other, being embarrassed or excluded themselves by the behaviour of that child when with their friends. Sometimes they simply don't know how to explain the presence of another child in the family. They may be aware of the need to protect that child's confidentiality but not sure about what they **can** say by way of introduction and explanation.

These issues can give rise to difficult feelings for sons and daughters as they want to share and be helpful but also experience feelings of resentment and anger when sharing results in negative outcomes for them. As one daughter says:

"I'm not allowed to share the fostered child's games, but am expected to share my own."<sup>14</sup>

Sons and daughters of foster carers are likely to become aware of certain social problems at a much earlier age than their peers. This can include very sensitive issues such as child abuse. Indeed, a son or daughter who has a good relationship with a fostered child may

<sup>12</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a)

<sup>13</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a)

<sup>14</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a)

experience that child talking to them directly about abuse they have suffered. These first hand accounts can be difficult for young people to hear and can worry them. However, sons and daughters also tell us that hearing about the bad experiences of some other children can help them appreciate their own families more and make them mature and responsible.

Sometimes sons and daughters can be thrown by 'one-off' incidents. One young person described how an irate parent (of a fostered child) arrived on the doorstep when no-one else was at home and he felt he had no-one to turn to for advice in that situation.

At the more extreme end of the difficulties they face, sons and daughters will have experienced violent verbal outbursts from children living with them and many have also experienced overt or covert threats of physical violence. Sometimes they have suffered actual physical violence. Many have also witnessed these behaviours towards their parents and found this upsetting although those suffering actual physical violence are in the minority.

Perhaps one of the most distressing experiences for all concerned is when a son or daughter becomes the subject of an allegation of abuse by a child who is fostered in the family. This has wide-ranging ramifications. It may result in children being removed and in the foster carer's other sons and daughters becoming subject to child protection investigations. The son or daughter who is the subject of the allegation may face a police investigation. Foster carers who have contacted the Fostering Network in these circumstances have been highly distressed with one commenting:

'I knew I was taking the risk for myself but I never thought that by fostering I was taking the risk of this happening to my son'.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the effect of allegations made against themselves, sons and daughters may also be profoundly distressed if their parents are the subject of such an allegation. This is an area of fostering where sons and daughters are clear that they would like more information and training.<sup>16</sup>

The evidence from research is that how the foster child gets on with the other children in the family, both the foster carer's children and other foster children, is important to the success of the placement<sup>17</sup>. It used to be believed that placing foster children in a family with other children of the same age was likely to lead to breakdown. This is probably an over simplistic view. However the quality and nature of the relationship between the foster child and any sons and daughters is important.

Generally foster carers are often prepared to put up with a great deal. But it is much more difficult for them if it is their children's things that are being stolen or trashed or their children who are abused.

### **3.2 Relationship with own parents and family**

The composition of a foster family changes every time a fostered child leaves or joins the household. This means that the sons and daughters of foster carers are constantly

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<sup>16</sup> Response from young people to consultation, Aug 08

<sup>17</sup> Sinclair 2005, Farmer

renegotiating their role within the family and adjusting to the new household members. One young daughter of foster carers described how she used to go out on her own at weekends with her dad but then found this one-to-one time had become a group activity when two other young children joined the family.

Sons and daughters have often described how they sometimes feel that their parents don't have time for their problems which, in any case, may seem trivial compared to the problems of children needing to be fostered. Again, sons and daughters may be living with the dilemma of understanding that fostered children need this time, but nevertheless feeling resentful and jealous at the loss of attention they suffer as a result. These emotions have been described as similar to those experienced by children adjusting to the arrival of a new sibling and to the jockeying for position that can occur in any sibling group. But for the sons and daughters of foster carers this may be a constant occurrence as the family is always in a state of flux.

This state of flux may, in the extreme, mean that younger sons and daughters develop anxiety about how permanent their own place is in the family. There have been instances where parents and social workers have had to reassure sons and daughters that they will not be taken to a new family if they misbehave – something they may have seen happen to other children<sup>18</sup>.

'I was only six and I thought he would stay with us forever. When he left I thought the same would happen to me.'<sup>19</sup>

Most sons and daughters report that they would talk to their parents if they were having difficulties because of their experience of fostering. However, there may be other reasons beyond time constraints which make sons and daughters reluctant to talk to their parents. Some sons and daughters feel a sense of loyalty towards their parents. They know that their parents enjoy fostering and are committed to it and indeed, they may appreciate that in some instances it is a significant source of family income. Consequently they don't necessarily want to admit that they are finding it difficult to cope with. Some feel that their parents are stressed enough dealing with the challenges of fostering and don't want to add to their stresses. Others are afraid that their concerns might not be understood and that they might be told they are being selfish.

Just as it can be very difficult for sons and daughters if their belongings are not respected or are damaged by a fostered child, so foster carers find it very difficult when their own children suffer as a consequence of the actions of a fostered child.

Many foster families value the opportunity of having time 'just as a family' so that parents can focus on their sons and daughters without the competing needs of foster children, the family can re-discover their identity as a family and everyone can re-charge their batteries. Indeed, in one survey of sons and daughters which asked what would improve their situation, 'more time alone with parents' was the most frequent answer given<sup>20</sup>. As one daughter of foster carers put it:

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<sup>18</sup> Kaplan in Nuske (2004)

<sup>19</sup> in Watson 2002

<sup>20</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a)

'I wish I could remember what my family is like. Whatever we do there are always extra children around. I don't mind them coming on holiday with us but I wish that occasionally we could be just us so I could see what we are really like.'<sup>21</sup>

It is possible to be creative about how family time can be achieved. Many families choose to do something together when the child they are looking after is on a contact visit. Some families make sure that they have a family meal once a week, while the child they look after is at an activity or on a visit. Where families foster young children, older sons and daughters see the time when the child is in bed as their family time.<sup>22</sup>

Providing families with a break from fostering clearly needs to be handled sensitively to ensure that the children who are fostered don't feel rejected or excluded by the family. But 'respite' is increasingly being offered by fostering services. Some fostering services insist that foster carers take such breaks and the fostered children are helped to understand from the outset of their placement that this is a requirement. This helps them to see that it is not a personal issue about them as an individual: "*it's not that we need respite from **you**, it's just that all foster carers in this agency have time off from fostering*".

The work of the Fostering Network and the findings of research studies describe how some sons and daughters respond to the pressures of their situation or of particular events by partially withdrawing from the family:

'I normally just stay out of the way. I listen to music to block it out'<sup>23</sup>

while others 'act out' and engage in behaviours designed to gain their parents attention:

'I would go and do things and get in trouble. I think to myself anyway now these days it was only so I could get mum or dad to come in and get me'<sup>24</sup>

26 per cent in a Fostering Network survey<sup>25</sup>, a significant minority, state that they would welcome the opportunity to talk things over with someone from outside the family.

### 3.3 Relationship with social work agencies

The relationship which sons and daughters of foster carers have with their fostering service begins from the point at which their parents make their first enquiry about becoming foster carers. It follows the 'life cycle' of their parent's contact with that agency as foster carers, involving their initial preparation and assessment by the fostering team, the process of the first placement (bringing them into contact with children's social workers), the probable ending of that placement and making of new placements, coupled with ongoing development through training, experience, and involvement in a range of fostering-related activities.

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<sup>21</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a)

<sup>22</sup> The Fostering Network consultation on this paper

<sup>23</sup> The Fostering Network 2007

<sup>24</sup> Nuske 2004

<sup>25</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a)

One key question which concerns the relationship between sons and daughters and social work agencies, is the extent to which social work staff seek direct contact with the sons and daughters of foster carers and the extent to which they rely on their parents to meet their needs in respect of fostering.

Legislation currently requires little of social work agencies in terms of direct work with the sons and daughters of foster carers. The regulations require only that those undertaking the assessment of families should gather information which includes 'particulars of the children in the family.'<sup>26</sup> In reality of course, and to varying degrees, many fostering providers include sons and daughters in their assessment and preparation processes. Most assessors speak directly to sons and daughters and include their views in the assessment report. Some fostering services provide a preparation session for the children of prospective foster carers, using the relevant 'Skills to Foster' module and some provide them with age-appropriate written information.

There are a number of other examples of practice from around the UK which seek to address the needs of sons and daughters:

One local authority invites (and appropriately rewards) the son of experienced foster carers to speak to prospective foster carers at a preparation session and to answer their questions. This helps parents to think about what fostering might mean for their children.<sup>27</sup>

A specialist fostering project in the voluntary sector invited the older sons and daughters of newly approved foster carers to be 'placed' overnight in other newly approved fostering households. This provided a 'dry run' for the foster carers and a valuable insight for the sons and daughters as to how being fostered might feel. There was a de-brief session following the overnight stay<sup>28</sup>.

A new foster family met with a son of family that had fostered for a while which had the effect of giving new friendship/peer support between the two sons.

When asked, some sons and daughters say that they would have liked more information and things to read before they became involved in fostering, and that they would have liked the opportunity to speak directly to other sons and daughters who could tell them what it's really like<sup>29</sup>.

'During the assessment process it's difficult to imagine what fostering is going to be like, so it's hard to give your view'<sup>30</sup>

Many say that they would like more training in order to understand their role and why a child may be fostered.

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<sup>26</sup> E.g. National Assembly for Wales (2003) Schedule 3; 4

<sup>27</sup> The Fostering Network (2007b)

<sup>28</sup> Project known to author

<sup>29</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a);

<sup>30</sup> Young person responding to consultation on this paper

Once beyond the assessment and preparation stages, most sons and daughters comment that they feel largely invisible to social work agencies.

'People come into our home and talk to my parents, they never really see that I'm here as well'

'I like my family fostering but it would be nice sometimes if I got attention'<sup>31</sup>

This feedback is not inevitable though. Where children and young people are part of a group for sons and daughters they usually report that they feel listened to, valued and as though their opinion counts. Fostering services sometimes develop their practice as a result of what they learn from such groups (see box below). Individual relationships can also be very helpful, sometimes particularly so in situations of high stress as this example demonstrates:

***The benefits of a group***

One local authority runs a group for sons and daughters. The group has produced a booklet for young people whose families are at the beginning of their fostering career and another for parents about the issues their children may face. After listening to their concerns, the authority has also given every son and daughter a card with the details of a fostering worker they can contact if they need to. Supervising social workers also make a point of spending time with the sons and daughters of foster carers when they visit.<sup>32</sup>

***The benefits of individual work***

A fostered girl talked to the young daughter of relatively inexperienced foster carers about how she had been sexually abused by her stepfather before coming into care. It was the first time she had told anyone what had happened to her. The whole family was shocked and the foster carers were uncertain how to help their daughter, especially as they were themselves feeling anxious as they were asked to give evidence in court about what their fostered child had said. In close consultation with her parents, their supervising social worker undertook several direct sessions to help their daughter make sense of what she had heard.

Other areas where sons and daughters feel it is important that their voices are heard concern the process of placements.

- **Placement beginnings**

Young people generally feel that they should be involved in deciding whether or not their family should offer a home to a particular child. They have told us that whether they are able to form a relationship with the child in placement and accept them into their home depends very much on how appropriately the children had been matched to their family and to what extent they understood the foster child's needs.<sup>33</sup> Their suggestions that a child should come for a visit before moving in, chime both with fostering standards and with what we know is good practice.

<sup>31</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a) p40

<sup>32</sup> The Fostering Network 2007b

<sup>33</sup> Consultation response, Camarthenshire July 2008

The issue of how much sons and daughters should be told about the circumstances of a fostered child is a complex one. On the one hand is the need to protect the confidentiality of fostered children and their families. On the other, we recognise that this is not always possible in a short-term emergency situation. It is vital that essential information is shared not only with the foster carers but passed on as appropriate and in an age-appropriate level to the sons and daughters of foster carers. This is particularly true of any situation where a family may have to ensure a safe caring strategy in order to mitigate against risk of allegations.

On the other is a son or daughter's need to know something of the situation of the child who has come to live in their home, to have some account which they can offer in public and to have information which will help them in making a child comfortable and in safeguarding both themselves and children who live with them. This has to be discussed on an individual basis and discussion should also take place as to who is best placed to give sons and daughters this information. Sons and daughters must be helped to understand when they need to pass on to an adult something that has been said to them by a fostered child and how to avoid promising to keep things a secret when this is a promise they would be unwise to keep.

- **Reviewing the placement**

During the course of a placement, sons and daughters may also feel excluded from ongoing plans – when no-one asks their opinion about how things are going for them or for the fostered child. This may also be the case when foster carers are undergoing their annual review, although some fostering services have established mechanisms for including the views of sons and daughters:

Along with the other paperwork, the panel in one local authority receives a feedback form completed by each of the sons and daughters of the foster carers whose approval they are reviewing, so that they can see whether the young people are pleased with how things are going or would like to see any changes.<sup>34</sup>

- **Placement endings**

The ending of a placement can be difficult for sons and daughters and the uncertainty that ending a placement suddenly can have on children, whether they are birth children or long-term fostered, should not be underestimated. It can be experienced as a major loss with all of the associated grieving that goes along with that, and yet sons and daughters tell us repeatedly that their feelings are rarely considered. Placements can end in a variety of ways, some being more difficult to deal with than others. At one extreme, the daughter of a foster carer might come home from school to find that a child who has been living with them has been moved. The son of a foster carer might find that the fostered child who has become a good friend returns to his own parents and is not heard from again.

It is recognised that it is not always possible for social workers to plan the ending of a placement, and in those circumstances they need to recognise that the remaining children

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<sup>34</sup> Example known to author

will need reassurance and support. However, where endings are planned, social work agencies can do much to alleviate any difficulties by planning carefully and considering the needs of sons and daughters, whenever possible. Passing on some general information about the welfare of a child who has moved on might be helpful and where relationships are strong, various forms of ongoing contact can be considered.

## Support

Social work agencies can also provide services which benefit the relationships of sons and daughters with fostered children and with their parents and families. Some of these, such as breaks from fostering (and respite provision for fostered children), have already been touched upon. Some are very practical, such as making sure that if any possessions are broken they are at the very least promptly replaced.

Groups for sons and daughters that are permanently funded and resourced also play a role in addressing some of these issues by giving young people the opportunity to meet with others in the same situation and to express their feelings about the challenging aspects of living within a foster family. Such forums can provide an opportunity for sons and daughters to receive age-appropriate information about different topics and to take part in informal awareness raising and help improve their understanding and knowledge.

Some sons and daughters have said that they would welcome this and have put forward topics as diverse as first aid, 'dealing with angry foster children', basic information about fostering, coping strategies and drug awareness<sup>35</sup>. One young person put her needs very eloquently, saying:

*'I found the behaviour of the children shocking. I had never realised that children could behave in such a way. It was so shocking that it stopped me being able to think about how I should be dealing with it. If I had had some training and been told some of the things that very damaged and abused children might do I would have been able to think about my reactions beforehand. And I would not have been so shocked at the time.'*<sup>36</sup>

Providing the range of learning and development opportunities which would assist sons and daughters of foster carers to better understand and cope with the needs of children living with them is a challenging task for fostering services. This is particularly so as much of this provision needs to be tailored to the varying ages of the sons and daughters taking part.

Young people say that they would welcome a named worker (possibly the supervising social worker) who would be their designated support worker, with whom they could build a relationship, but who could also be a link to all the other professionals who were coming and going in the household. One local authority in Wales provides a contact card with emergency numbers for all their sons and daughters so they know that there is someone to contact if their parents are not around and they need some support urgently.

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<sup>35</sup> The Fostering Network (2003a) p45

<sup>36</sup> IFCO conference 1997

Given the range of ways in which young people communicate through technology, helping sons and daughters to network via social networking sites may require moderation in order to keep everyone safe, but provides enormous benefits to the users.

## **Recognition**

We described above how sons and daughters can feel invisible to social work agencies. That is, they feel that their involvement in and contribution to fostering goes unnoticed and unrecognised but as one foster carer said 'thanks are very important and it doesn't cost anything'. There is much that services can do to show that they value the role played by sons and daughters in sharing their homes and families with children who are looked after in public care. This need not cost much – a letter from a senior member of staff in the local authority/HSST can have a big impact whilst taking little time to do. Here are a few examples of other initiatives:

A number of local authorities joined together with the Fostering Network to hold an award ceremony which included recognising the particular contributions of individual sons and daughters.

A birthday card and 'thank you' message is sent to all sons and daughters in one local authority.

Together with fostered children, sons and daughters are invited to all the trips and activities laid on in the holidays by one independent fostering provider.

## **Conclusion**

Our expectations of the sons and daughters of foster carers are high. We ask them to share their homes, possessions and families with children they don't know. We ask them to cope with a wide range of behaviours from children who live with them, to learn about difficult subjects very early in their lives, to run a range of risks from low level annoyances to threats, violence and allegations. We owe it to these children and young people to give them recognition, listen to what they have to say, involve them in decisions which affect their lives and provide them with services which help them to deal with the challenges of their role.

The examples given above show that some fostering services are working hard to make sure that the sons and daughters are valued and given the services they need. But this practice is neither widespread nor consistent. The Fostering Network makes the following recommendations which aim to strengthen regulations and guidance with respect to sons and daughters and ensure that social work agencies, and other relevant bodies, develop strong policies and consistent practices which meet their needs.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

### Change in culture

Whilst foster carers are the people who are approved to foster, it has to be recognised and acknowledged throughout the system that **whole families are involved in the fostering task**. In order for placements to be successful, it is essential that there is an increased awareness amongst all those involved in fostering of the importance of the role of sons and daughters of foster carers. For this to be fully recognised and for cultural change to be achieved everyone involved in foster care must:

- recognise and acknowledge the importance of the role played by the sons and daughters of foster carers in fostering
- ensure that the views and wellbeing of sons and daughters are taken into consideration throughout the fostering process and experience from assessment, matching and placement to placement endings and contact beyond placement
- provide recognition and where appropriate, rewards, to sons and daughters
- provide a range of support services to sons and daughters which promote their welfare and assist them in their role within the fostering service.

It is important to acknowledge that sons and daughters have no statutory responsibilities within fostering and therefore there must be no element of compulsion in their taking up any of the service opportunities on offer.

All the following recommendations refer to sons and daughters without any reference to their age or understanding. Clearly they need to be interpreted in ways that take account of the age and understanding of the son or daughter.

### The Fostering Network makes the following recommendations for:

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| <b>1 Governments</b> |
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In order to address the major cultural shift that is required to improve the fostering experience for all those affected by it governments must:

- 1.1 **Commission research** on the long-term impact of, and contribution to, fostering of sons and daughters, foster carers and fostered children.
- 1.2 **Strengthen the regulations, guidance and standards** that govern how agencies work with and support the sons and daughters of foster carers, in order to ensure that the views and welfare of sons and daughters are taken into account throughout the fostering experience. This includes:
  - during the assessment process, and whenever possible *before* making a placement
  - how panels and decision-makers take sons and daughters into consideration in making their recommendations and decisions
  - when decisions are made about placing children

- ensuring that sons and daughters have the opportunity to express and contribute their views to the foster carer's annual review.
- 1.3 **Introduce a requirement on fostering services to provide a range of services** that offer appropriate and consistent levels of support and advice and training to the sons and daughters of foster carers, providing the necessary toolkit to help them do this and **make sure that inspectorates satisfy themselves that fostering services meet this requirement**
  - 1.4 **Ensure that inspectorates recognise the valuable perspective that sons and daughters can provide on the quality and nature of the fostering service, and take account of the views of sons and daughters when inspecting services**
  - 1.5 Consider the **contribution of sons and daughters to foster care and the impact of foster care on sons and daughters** when agreeing frameworks for post qualification awards for social workers
  - 1.6 **Ensure that social workers' training includes a focus on the sons and daughters of foster carers**, their contribution to fostering and the impact that fostering has on their lives.

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| <b>2 Fostering Services</b> |
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Fostering services need to recognise the crucial role of sons and daughters in the success or otherwise of placements. The impact that fostering can have on sons and daughters both in the present and for the future must be acknowledged. The mental health and well-being of sons and daughters is of equal importance to that of fostered children. In addition, many sons and daughters enter the caring professions and very many of them will be the foster carers of tomorrow. How they are supported, how they view the fostering experience, and how they view fostering services' support of them may all influence their future choices.

In order to ensure that the experience of sons and daughters of fostering is felt as positive and supportive, in accordance with existing guidance, the Fostering Network recommends that fostering services:

- 2.1 **In line with good practice and regulations, consider the views and the wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers at all stages in the fostering process and provide appropriate support as required:**
  - at the initial recruitment stage, holding a profile on their views and thoughts about fostering and the types of child/young person they would be happy to welcome into their home
  - identifying what information and support they need in order to understand their role in a fostering family and to be comfortable within it
  - during placements when discussion can take place during foster carers' reviews
  - as placements end, in considering issues of loss and separation and the possibility of ongoing contact with the foster family.

- 2.2 **Designate a worker from the fostering team as the key contact for sons and daughters at the start of the process** so that there is a channel for them to register their questions, concerns or complaints. This worker should be responsible for developing appropriate mechanisms that will support the son/daughter in their fostering role, will ensure that services respond to their needs, and that sons and daughters know how to gain advice directly from the service, particularly when needed urgently.
- 2.3 **Provide sons and daughters of foster carers with a range of services which promote their wellbeing, which assist them in the challenges they face through their involvement in foster care and give recognition and reward for this role.** Access should be age appropriate and available through many sources including web sites, email groups and face to face contact. These include:
- The opportunity to build a relationship with a key individual in the fostering team and to be able to speak with them from time to time and on request
  - Access to a support group that is fully funded on a permanent basis and that provides an opportunity to meet with other sons and daughters
  - Opportunities to receive further information/awareness raising on matters related to foster care
  - Appropriate recognition from a person in authority (e.g. an annual letter of thanks, a trip or a thank you present).
- 2.4 **Take the necessary steps to ensure that fostering panels are properly trained and informed** so that they fully understand the impact of fostering on sons and daughters and take into account the views and welfare of sons and daughters when making their recommendations and decisions. In order to ensure that panels are fully representative, fostering services should encourage and support sons and daughters who might be able to make a contribution as an independent panel member that is valued equally to that of other members of the panel, and provide appropriate preparation, coaching and/or training for them.
- 2.5 **Seek the views of sons or daughters before making a placement which involves a fostered child sharing a bedroom with the son or daughter.** These should be taken into consideration alongside other issues such as culture, gender and age, and other implications for the family, such as what would happen if a son or daughter returns home from university at holiday times etc.
- 2.6 **Ensure that sons and daughters have quality time with their parents, away from the fostered child so that they can re-experience their family as a unit.** Good practice suggests that fostering services should provide a flexible package of respite from the fostering task for the whole family that meets everyone's needs. In order for this to happen with the least disruption, fostered children need to know from the start of the placement what the fostering agency's policy is on breaks. Fostering services should ensure it is clear that foster carers are entitled to a break. If respite is part of a plan in a permanent placement, it is important that it is handled sensitively so that children can feel positive about arrangements that are made for them when their foster carers take a break.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Signpost – Long-term foster care

## **2.7 Have clear policies regarding safe caring and the management of allegations which state clearly:**

- The expectation that sons and daughters have the necessary age appropriate knowledge in order to function in a safe caring environment
- The support available to the sons and daughters of foster carers should they become the subject of an allegation of abuse and the support available to them should another members of their family become subject to an allegation of abuse
- That the safety and protection of sons and daughters of foster carers is given the same weight as that of other children
- That they will provide legal protection insurance for the sons and daughters of their foster carers who are aged 18 and over.

**2.8 Satisfy themselves that the sons and daughters of foster carers have an understanding of any requirements to keep information confidential.** This includes guidance on the use of social networking sites, and requires that age appropriate guidance on the need to hold some information in confidentiality is freely available and accessible.

**2.9 Ensure that the supervising social worker sees the sons or daughters on their own at least once a year at a time suitable for the son or daughter, and more frequently if that is requested, in order to build up a positive, trusting relationship with them.**

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| <b>3 Foster carers</b> |
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Foster carers with their own children are also parents who must balance their fostering task with their parental task. It is always a possibility that for a variety of reasons foster carers may either not recognise or be reluctant to recognise the impact that fostering has on their sons and daughters. With appropriate support and training, foster carers can balance the two complex tasks, but the challenge needs to be acknowledged and supported. In order to ensure that their sons/daughters are able to 'learn to live a different life' foster carers must be mindful of guidance and also:

**3.1 Recognise and be sensitive to the impact of fostering on their own sons and daughters,** acknowledging the impact it has on their sons and daughters' immediate and wider family relationships, on their friendships and the ways in which they live their lives.

**3.2 Ensure that their own sons and daughters can access, interpret and understand the information given to them by fostering services**

**3.3 Ensure that their sons and daughters have information about support services available to them** and encourage their sons and daughters to contribute to support groups or take part in other events or networking opportunities for sons and daughters

- 3.4 **Enable their sons and daughters to give their views** in whichever way suits them (ie. verbally, in written form etc) to supervising social workers or others in whom they have confidence
- 3.5 **Ensure their sons and daughters understand the need to share information to safeguard the wellbeing of a fostered child and have age appropriate guidance**
- 3.6 **Access and take up opportunities for breaks and family time** that balance the needs of their own children with the needs of the fostered child
- 3.7 **Ensure that sons and daughters have guidance that is age appropriate** on their responsibilities to share information to safeguard the wellbeing of a fostered child.

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