Making Research Count
The Role of the Supervising Social Worker in Foster Care
22nd September 2014
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The interface between social work and foster care
• Assessment of prospective foster carers
• Supervision and support of foster carers
• Building on foster carer development and training
• Foster carer reviews
• Fostering Panels.

What we know so far
• Quite a bit about foster care in general
• Quite a lot about who fosters, their motivation and what contributes to effective recruitment and retention
• Quite an amount about the effectiveness of foster carer training
• But little about the interface between social work and foster care, regarding its impact on the wellbeing of fostered children
• Little about the effectiveness of the supervision of foster carers
• Little about the effectiveness of prospective foster carer assessment and review
• Little about the effectiveness of fostering panels in enhancing the quality of foster care.

Successful supervision
• Morrison and Wonnacott’s paper about supervision of social workers and whether it contributes to outcomes for service users, can be applied to SSWs’ supervision of foster carers and the influence this might have on outcomes for foster children.
• ‘The limited research that exists into the impact of supervision on outcomes for service users indicates that supervision also needs to be grounded within a secure professional relationship where the supervisor takes time to understand and assess the supervisee’s strengths and weaknesses. Professional practice, and worker/service user dynamics need to be critically analysed, and the impact of the worker’s emotions on thoughts and actions explored. This is the basis by which reflective but authoritative social work/care practice is developed.’ (Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010)
• So – SSWs need effective supervision themselves to be effective with foster carers.

Social work supervision of foster carers
- Surprisingly little research or scholarly attention regarding social work supervision of foster carers
- ‘Support’ makes a difference to foster carer retention (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor, Pithouse and Sellick, 2004)
- ‘Support’ makes a difference to the care of teenagers (Farmer, Moyers and Lipscombe, 2005)
- ‘The research reviewed here shows that ‘support’ for carers, and for birthparents, and attention to children’s wishes are critical to ensure quality and continuity in placements.’ (Boddy, 2013, p30)

Sinclair (2005) defining ‘support’
- Finance
- Training and preparation
- Carer groups
- Social work support
- Night duty teams
- Short breaks
- Preparation for placements
- Teamwork. (Sinclair, 2005, 107-111)
What the standards, guidance and regulations say

- "It is the SSW’s role to supervise the foster carer’s work, to ensure that they are meeting the child’s needs, and to offer support and a framework to assess the foster carer’s performance and develop their skills." (H M Government, 2011, p51)

- This is reiterated in standard 21 of the NMS (2011, pp42 - 43). The formal supervisory nature of the SSW and foster carer relationship is noted in the NMS 21.8: ‘Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer’s work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child’s needs, taking into account the child’s wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer’s performance and develop their competencies and skills.’ (DfE, 2011, p43)

Lawson’s components of SSW’s supervision of foster carers

- Providing information, advice and guidance
- Reviewing practical and emotional support needs
- Checking standards of care
- Responding to comments, concerns and allegations
- Ensuring compliance with policies and procedures
- Noting significant events and changes to the household
- Managing risk, health and safety and ensuring safer care
- Reviewing implementation of care plans for each child in placement
- Monitoring impact of fostering on the household
- Identifying and supporting learning and development needs
- Reviewing current and future use of resources
- Checking payments and equipment
- Reviewing records
- Reviewing carer’s relationship with children placed.’ (2011, p37)

Others?

Noting significant events and changes to the household

- What might some of the tensions be for the SSW and the foster carer?

- Nutt (2006)

Noting significant events and changes to the household

- The foster carer’s circumstances and the composition of the fostering household
- The fostering couple - relationship, dynamics, respective foster carer roles
- Single foster carer’s relationships
- Effectiveness of support network
- The foster carer’s home – (Ferguson, 2010)
- The foster carer’s children (birth, adoptive, and those subject to SGOs or ROs).

Reviewing the foster carer’s relationship with children placed

- What would this involve/include?
Reviewing the foster carer’s relationship with children placed

- The SSW’s and foster carer’s focus - the foster child:
  - Identity, heritage and sense of self
  - Building resilience
  - Contact – working with the child’s family
  - Facilitating emotional well being
  - Enabling sport, creative, leisure activities and making friends
  - Facilitating health

- Managing behaviour and enabling behavioural change
- Helping the foster child/young person make transitions
- Multi-professional team work, to realise the child’s placement and care plan including their PEP.

Other key areas of the SSW’s role and responsibility

- Placement planning and delegated authority (child’s social worker)
- Team around the child
- Working with foster carers as fellow professionals
- The SSW and child’s social worker’s effective working relationship
- Monitoring and enabling the foster carer’s relationship with the SSW and the fostering service
- Allegations and standards of care
- Monitoring the effectiveness of the foster carer’s support network.

Summary

- The jury remains out, in respect of research findings that definitively inform us about whether or not the quantity and quality of supervision and support to foster carers makes a difference to foster children’s lives
- We do know it makes a difference to the retention of foster carers, and given the shortage of foster carers this is significant
- Despite the ambiguous research findings supervision of foster carers can make a difference to the quality of foster care for an individual foster child, and supervision is a core component of the overall quality assurance of foster care.

References