

**FOSTERING**  
**DIFFERENCE**

**PRINCIPLES FOR WORKING  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH  
FOSTER PARENTS**

Building a Supportive Relationship with Foster Parents

Dr Sara McLean

# ***‘One note does not make a symphony; one artist does not make an orchestra’***

## **Acknowledgment:**

This resource is part of a series of resources for foster parents who are raising children living with developmental difference caused by early life adversity. The guides are intended to provide general educational information only, and are not a substitute for professional assessment and intervention.

These resources were developed with the generous support of the Eureka Benevolent Foundation, and the author is grateful to the foundation for their support. The author would also like to thank the many foster parents that generously donated their time and expertise to the development of these resources.

## **Citation:**

McLean, S (2017). *Principles for Working in Partnership with Foster Parents: Guide to building a Supportive Relationship with Foster Parents*. Available from [www.fosteringdifference.com.au](http://www.fosteringdifference.com.au)



## Principles for Supporting Foster Parents Raising Children with Developmental Difference.

One of the most important aspects of supporting foster families is the quality of the relationship you form with them. This is a relationship that comes with unique tensions. On the one hand your role is to offer emotional and practical support to foster parents that can be managing complex and challenging behaviours on a daily basis. On the other hand, you are required to monitor and report any concerns regarding the quality of the care provided by parents. It can be difficult to provide genuine and empathic support while also having a 'care and protection' role. Newer support workers may need supervision, support and guidance to balance these roles.

In order for foster parents to build a trusting relationship with a support workers, parents need to feel sure that the concerns they raise with you will not be used against them; nor reflect badly on them as parents. They will need reassurance that it is *normal* for foster parents to experience difficulty. Parenting a child with developmental difference will invariably be challenging at some point.

The following values and beliefs are helpful in supporting parents who may be struggling.

### Validation

It is critically important for foster parents to feel validated. Validating foster parents' concerns is different from agreeing with their point of view. It means that you *understand* and *accept* their experience. Foster parents' previous attempts to seek help may have fallen on deaf ears. Their concerns may have been minimised or dismissed altogether. Validating their experience is critical, even if you do not agree with their views.

Whenever possible you should validate foster parents' views about a child's behaviour. Validate foster parents' knowledge and observations about the child that is in their care – remember while you may have expertise in knowing what works for most children, they are the expert on their child. Let them know if you agree with their assessment; or that you understand the kind of difficulty they are dealing with. Use developmental charts and behavioural checklists to confirm and validate foster parents' gut feelings about a child's behaviour. These kinds of checklists can tell you if a child's behaviour is within developmental limits; and can be a powerful means of affirming a foster parents' observations. Using developmental or behavioural checklists can also help parents to advocate for additional support.



## Encourage Radical Acceptance

Being a foster parent is an emotional rollercoaster. Foster parents will at times experience shame and guilt over not being able to cope. They can become overly focussed on their perceived failures and the child's difficulties; and lose sight of the small gains they may have made.

It is important to show compassion towards the difficulty they are experiencing; and to let them know that they are not bad parents *even if they feel bad about their parenting experience* at the moment.

It can be helpful to encourage parents to tolerate both the positive and negative emotions associated with parenting a challenging child. This means a 'radical acceptance' the experience of fostering- and a focus on acceptance of emotions and events that cannot be controlled. Remind parents that mistakes provide an opportunity to learn more about themselves and their child. Set-backs provide important opportunities for learning about 'rupture' in relationship and how to 'repair' relationship with their child.

Identify what parents are doing well, despite adversity. This can help to counteract the doubts they may have about their parenting effectiveness. Encourage foster parents to accept that parenting can feel *both good and bad* at the same time- that parenting is not an 'all good' or 'all bad' experience; but can be both at the same time. Developing tolerance for the negative and positive emotions associated with parenting helps parents to be more effective and resilient. This 'radical acceptance' of what can't be changed is a central feature of mindful parenting.

## Highlight the Positives

Your conversations with foster parents should build in opportunities to 'name and reframe' behaviours in positive terms. Conversations with foster parents can become very 'problem saturated' and it is important to recognise that children do have real difficulties that require support. However, children also have strengths that can be leveraged and built on. Notice and point out any positive traits and strengths. Keeping the focus on a child's strengths can build a positive parent-child relationship and help a child to feel a sense of competence as well. Pointing out a child's strengths is also a way to authentically compliment the parent and acknowledge what is going well. Problem behaviour can also be re-cast as a strength (for example, refusing bed can be reframed as a clever survival strategy that comes from having lived in a frightening home; rather than deliberate defiance).

## Promote Quality Parent- Child Time

Ensure that foster parents build in quality time with their child. Scheduling parent-child time is important for all children with disruptive and challenging behaviour. However, it is especially important



for children whose early relationships were toxic or neglectful. The nature and amount of this time should suit the parent's timetable.

Parent- child time should be child-led, rather than parent-directed. Child-led play time occurs when there are child-led, age appropriate activities in which there is opportunity for reflecting feelings, experiencing positive emotions, and safely expressing feelings. During this time, the foster parent should not discipline, direct or impose adult views or directions on the play. This special time is for 'joining in the child's world' -engaging with the child in whatever the child is interested in at the time. In younger children this may involve floor time. For adolescents it may be more like the parent playing a computer game with them; with an emphasis on fun.

This should be a time where the child has unconditional access to the foster parent's time and attention; without any other agenda (such as homework, household chores). This time should be quarantined and named as 'play time'; with a set time limit that is manageable for the foster parent to do on most days.

### **Foster Parents' Curiosity**

Many of the behaviours that foster parents experience from children are perplexing and may not initially make a lot of sense. It can be helpful to take a 'watch and wonder' approach to children's behaviour, especially during the initial stages of a placement. Encourage foster parents to consider the range of possible reasons for their child's challenging behaviour; rather than remaining fixed on one or two possible explanations. You may also find the resource in this series 'Foster parents' guide to behaviour management' useful.

Coach parents to reflect on the 'context for behaviour'; what might have been going on for the child at the time; and the possible functions served by behaviour. Remind parents that behaviour is dynamic; that there may be many reasons for behaviours at any one time; and that effective parents constantly review their responses to children's behaviour. Encourage parents to question whether their expectations are appropriate; whether their child is distressed in some way; or what other incentives may be in play. Parents can be coached to nurture this curiosity in their conversations with their child; as this kind of questioning builds emotional intelligence and shared understanding. You may find the resources 'Foster parents' guide to behaviour management' and 'Support workers' guide to behaviour management' in this series useful. See [www.fosteringdifference.com.au](http://www.fosteringdifference.com.au).

### **Teach Very Specific Skills**

It is likely that you will need to coach and support foster parents in specific skills of parenting. Foster parenting is both similar and different to 'normal' parenting. We often assume that a foster parent will cope well if they have already have parenting experience. In fact, it can sometimes be more challenging



for parents that have already raised their own biological children to adapt their parenting style to suit the unique needs of a traumatised or developmentally challenged child.

Foster parents will need coaching in the very specific parenting skills related to parenting a child with developmental difference. Parenting skills need to be used in a more precise and consistent way than in 'normal' parenting. Foster parents will benefit from rehearsing specific skills with you. Although this might seem strange at first, evidence suggests the importance of rehearsing and practising parenting skills to ensure skills are performed to 'criterion'.

Example skills include i) giving clear and direct instructions; ii) using praise and rewards effectively; iii) responding empathically to the child's feelings; iv) using planned ignoring and distraction; v) using warnings and logical consequences; vi) coaching children in problem solving; vii) and emotion coaching.

The research tells us we need to get parents to model and rehearse parenting 'micro' skills in the counselling session; followed by completing targeted homework exercises in which the skill is practiced and reflected on. Focus your energy on the skills that are particularly difficult for your parents. Parenting skills that are particularly important for children with developmental difference include i) giving effective instructions (short, simple language), ii) responding empathically (to children's pain and underlying need) and iii) using praise effectively.

### **Encourage Optimistic Perseverance**

Raising children with developmental difference can be exhausting and there can be many setbacks and frustrations. Ensure that you spend time emphasising to foster parents the important role that they play in children's lives. Encourage 'optimistic perseverance' - an attitude of taking one step at a time; confident that the long term goal will be achieved over time.

Foster parents have the potential to influence children's lives *much more than any professional can do*. However, it can sometimes be difficult for carers to 'see the woods for the trees'. Everyday problems and obstacles can mean that they (and you) can lose sight of the gains that have been made in a child's life. An important part of your support will be encouraging the parent to reflect on, and celebrate, the small 'wins'. This habit can help foster and maintain a positive 'mindset' and sense of achievement that might otherwise be hard to maintain over time.



To find out more about Developmental Difference visit;

[www.fosteringdifference.com.au](http://www.fosteringdifference.com.au)

