FOSTERING DIFFERENCE

SUPPORTING PLACEMENT STABILITY

Exploring and addressing sources of placement strain

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'When you really listen to a person from their point of view, and reflect back to them that understanding, it's like giving them emotional oxygen'

Acknowledgment:

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Understanding the Sources of Foster Placement Strain

There are many stresses involved in being a foster parent. In any family there will be periods of stress from time to time. For example, the placement of any child within any foster family will mean a period of adjustment as the family 're-forms' its identity to include the foster child. Foster families also experience additional and unique stressors that can add to their sense of feeling overwhelmed. The main sources of strain will be outlined in this document.

Times of transition and change are especially stressful for foster families. Whenever a child begins adolescence; changes school, starts high school, or changes family contact arrangements; there is additional strain placed on the foster family. Transitions and change like these are especially difficult for children with developmental difference due to early life adversity, pervasive developmental disorders of prenatal alcohol exposure (FASD). Times of transition, although stressful, also offer the support worker the opportunity to revisit foster parents' values, beliefs and skills in relation to parenting and their foster child.

This resource describes some of the main sources of stress for foster families and the key concerns in supporting families. It can be useful to review each of these areas in turn and explore how these factors are impacting on the foster family you are supporting- the following questions can be useful:

Is this a time of transition for the family?

Transitions add to a family's stress and it is particularly important to provide additional support during times of transition and change. These include changes in family composition, change in marital status, onset of adolescence, change of school, change in family access arrangements, loss of significant relationships, or preparing for a young person to transition from care.

How does the foster parent view this? How does this compare with the evidence?

It can be useful to consider how much a foster parent's perception is contributing to their stress. Consider the extent to which the foster parent's view mirrors your objective assessment. In what way could the parent's views and beliefs be contributing to their stress and how can you gently challenge these beliefs. Parent's beliefs can also be based in fact- and can act as prompts for you to consider whether your perception of the situation is accurate as well.

## What skills are needed? What is getting in the way of applying these skills?

Consider what skills the foster parent needs to address this situation more effectively. Does the parent have the skills needed to stabilise the placement (for example parenting skills, addressing sleep issues or addressing sensory issues). What is the knowledge and ability of the carer to address this? Are there skills that could be taught or modelled that could help? If the parent has the skills, what is stopping them from being used effectively?

What is the foster parent's tolerance? Is burnout a risk?

What is the carers' emotional resilience for this issue? What can be done to build carers emotional regulation and tolerance for difficulties in this area? What's the carers' level of burnout, emotional exhaustion and sense of hopelessness about these difficulties? What can be done to promote hope and optimism? What does the carer need to persist during times of emotional exhaustion? How well does the foster parent manage at the moment? Is the foster parent feeling emotionally drained and at risk of burnout?

The main areas of foster placement strain are summarised in this diagram. In the following pages, we look at each of the main areas of stress in turn.
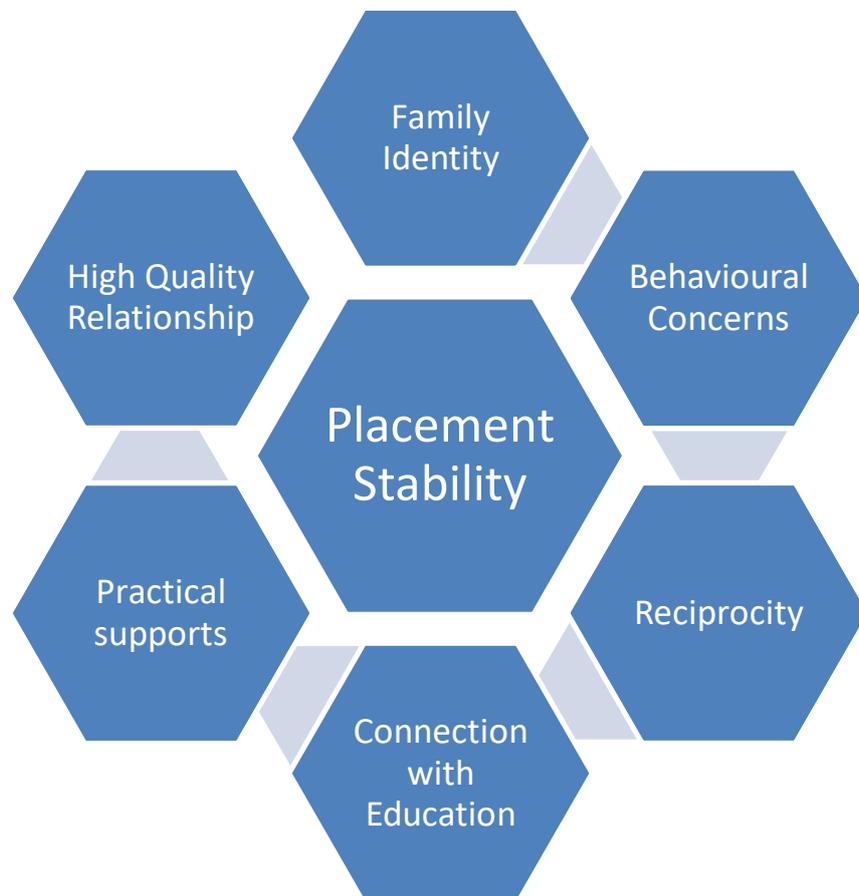
Family identity

Family identity is one area that can be strained in foster families from time to time. More subtle sources of strain can be uncovered by exploring with foster parents how the placement has changed their family's identity. The placement of a child in a family affects family relationships in often unexpected ways. Biological siblings, adult children, and partners can all be affected, both positively and negatively; in ways that are not easy to predict prior to placing a child.

The placement of a child affects the identity and relationships of all family members. Consider how supportive family members are towards the child and the placement. Consider how you can support the wider family to understand and support the placement of this child. For example, do family members feel that the placement is causing stress, strained or diminished relationship with parent(s)? Do family members understand the day to day impact of living with a child who is traumatised or has developmental difference? Do family members need support to understand why their fostered brother or sister needs 'special treatment' and makes more demands on the family's time and resources? Does the foster child's behaviour towards everyone in the family show that they value these relationships? Or does the child's behaviour show that only some family members are valued and not others?

The placement of a child affects family dynamics and family relationships in an ongoing way. Consider where and how you can support a more cohesive family functioning. It can be useful to obtain the wider family's views about how fostering has affected them. Foster parents can be extremely committed to their foster child -but sometimes this can mean they become 'too close' to the situation to see any impact on the rest of their family clearly.

The placement of a child also involves accommodating the child's biological family. Consider how the family access affects the foster family. Is the child able to self-regulate during the lead up to family contact; and is there a routine in place to 'reconnect' the foster child with their foster family following family access? Are the foster parents able to speak positively about the child's biological family; or do they need support to reframe biological parent's behaviour in positive terms? Are they able to identify positive attributes in the child that they can link to the child's biological family (e.g., strong will, persistence, physical or sporting ability)? Are foster parents able to support the child to accept that they have two families that care for them? Are carers able to help young people grieve for the lost ideal of family so that they are able to see the value in their foster family?

A child's behaviour can also impact on family identity. It can send information to the family about whether or not the child identifies as a member of the foster family. Does the foster child display behaviours that serve to 'distance' the foster parents? Does the child's behaviours send a message to carers that the child does not acknowledge themselves as a member of this family? Behaviours like walking off with strangers; or acting in sexually inappropriate ways towards foster family members are not only distressing but can signal to the foster parent that the child doesn't see them as 'family'.

A child's inevitable search for identity can also strain foster family identity. Even when a child has been settled in their placement; entering adolescence may mean that children 'revisit' issues of identity and belonging. The burning questions of adolescents centre around questions of identity such as 'Who am I' and 'Where do I belong'? A renewed interest in their family of origin can be distressing to foster parents unless they are supported to see this as a normal part of adolescent development.

Key questions to ask about family identity

- What impact does this placement have on each family member?
- How has this placement changed family dynamics and cohesiveness?
- How well is the child's biological family accommodated?
- Do the child's behaviours challenge family identity and cohesiveness?
- Does the child's search for identity challenging family cohesiveness?

Behavioural Concerns

One factor that is reliably linked to placement strain and breakdown is when a child has high levels of behaviour problems. However, the nature of the behavioural difficulty and the age of the child are also important considerations. For example, foster parents are likely to find behaviours related to harm and violence towards others especially difficult to manage (sexual harm, harm of biological children or animals, running away). These are 'high level' behaviours that are difficult to accommodate and control in a family environment.

Other behaviours are also likely to cause placement strain. Although behaviours like walking off with strangers; or not showing gratitude are not considered 'high level' behaviours they are nonetheless likely to threaten placement stability. This is because of the way that these kinds of behaviours are interpreted by foster parents. It is very common for these behaviours to be interpreted as the child rejecting the family or signalling that they don't see themselves as part of a 'family'.

Some behaviours that could be described as 'daily hassles' can nonetheless cause a lot of strain. The child who is disorganised and forgetful (poor executive functioning) requires constant monitoring and reminding to stay on track. If a child has poor memory or organisation skills it can mean that foster parents need to keep monitoring and prompting the child; and that they need to do this even when the child is older. This can be extremely tiring. A child who fatigues easily, or has difficulty getting started on tasks, will often need the family to adapt their routines and schedules in order to work around the child and their needs.

Therefore it is important to ask about the impact of behaviour on the household. Both extreme behaviours and the chronic and persistent, 'daily hassles' can be equally important.

Key questions to ask about behaviour concerns

- What impact do the child's behaviours have on this placement?
- Do the child's behaviours cause harm to self and others in family?
- Do the child's behaviours threaten family identity?
- Is there a good developmental fit between the child's age and their behaviours?
- Is the family dealing with high stakes behaviour?
- Is the family dealing with chronic daily hassles?

Reciprocity

The presence of warm and reciprocal relationships amongst family members is an important correlate of placement stability. An important area of enquiry therefore is the extent to which the foster parent (and other family members) experience their relationship with the foster child as rewarding and reciprocal. There can be barriers to this.

A child's need to protect themselves by engaging in defensive behaviour can mean that a parent experiences them as not responsive to their affection. For example, a child may act as though they do not value the foster parent; they may treat the foster parent as yet another uncaring adult; they may be reluctant to show affection towards the parent; or they may violate family boundaries and rules. This might include not seeking out foster parents when distressed and in need of comfort; or being overly affectionate to complete strangers. Or it could include mean failing to recognise 'family' from others; for example by walking off with complete strangers, or behaving in a sexualised manner towards a foster parent or other family member. A child can also be emotionally restricted; and remain remaining distrustful of the carer despite all that has been done by the carer to prove themselves trustworthy.

Children who are seen as unable to reciprocate affections, or value family or loyalty are particularly difficult to care for. Foster parents who are motivated by altruism, and whose self-identity involves being caring and loved individuals can really struggle to find caregiving 'reward' in a 'one-way' relationship. Foster parents may need additional support to notice small and subtle signs of reciprocity in their relationship with their child.

Key questions to ask about reciprocity

- How is this relationship viewed? Is the child seen as reciprocating relationship or is it viewed as 'all give'.

- What is the foster parent saying to themselves about their relationship with the child?

- How does reciprocity (or lack thereof) affect the foster parent's identity?

- How can perceptions about lack of reciprocity be gently challenged?

Educational Engagement

A child's connection to school can be a powerful protective and stabilising factor for placements. When a child is at school it can be the only respite that a parent gets. School can be an important source of support for both the foster parent and the child. When school is working well for the young person, it is an opportunity for developing resilience, developing academic skills, for peer acceptance and belonging as a valued member of a community.

It is extremely common for children in care to avoid going to school. In many instances, children are not well connected with the educational environment. They may come into care with a history of patchy school attendance or poor literacy and numeracy skills. Their experience of school may not have been very positive. They may have experienced bullying or have been marginalised in other ways because of their appearance. They may have a history of poor academic achievement and poor self-esteem in relation to their learning. There may be undiagnosed developmental differences such as hearing problems, language difficulties or sensory issues that make it difficult for them to manage the school environment. They may have 'history' with the local school; or know children that attend that school that they would rather avoid. Schools may not fully understand the child's needs, and restrict the child's access to school as a means of managing other children's safety.

The extent to which a child is engaged with learning is a key factor in fostering placement stability. When a child is not engaged with schooling or vocational education there is usually a significant 'knock on' effect for foster parents. Many have to reduce their work commitments; or their work may suffer from repeatedly having to collect children from school. If the child is excluded or on restricted hours this places a significant burden on the foster parent.

Working in partnership with the school can significantly improve placement stability and reduce placement strain. It is important to ensure that the school fully understands the difficulties the child is experiencing. A child with developmental differences such as poor language ability, poor memory, central auditory processing difficulty, poor executive functioning or sensory difficulties will find the classroom environment extremely taxing. Teachers may need support to understand the impact of these difficulties on the child and the child's capacity to attend and learn. Teachers may need support

to implement appropriate strategies. Unstructured 'social' times such as recess, lunch and 'free play' are especially difficult for a child with developmental difference; and the child will need additional support during these times. Transitioning from activity to activity is also likely to be difficult for many children. It can help to have the child 'touch base' with a consistent adult at the start and finish of their school day (e.g., school counsellor). For specific strategies to support the child with developmental difference in a learning environment, please see the resources in this series on Executive Functioning, Sensory Regulation, Common Diagnoses, FASD and Language & Communication at www.fosteringdifference.com.au

Key questions to ask about education

- How engaged is the child in their education?
- What is the child's experience of school and learning?
- What does the child struggle with in a learning environment?
- How well does the school understand the child's learning needs?
- What barriers exist to school engagement? How can these be addressed?
- What level of burden does the foster parent experience because of schooling issues?

Practical Supports

Sometimes more practical supports are needed to reduce placement strain. Practical supports can take the form of financial support, support with respite and frequent breaks; support with transporting a child; or specialist therapeutic input.

While foster parents are not motivated by financial gain; there can be times when extra financial support can make the difference between a child being successfully placed or not. 'Specialist' or 'Therapeutic' foster parents may receive the equivalent of a salary for providing a home to a child with complex needs. This kind of care arrangement is common for children with developmental difference due to early life adversity and is necessary when a parent is no longer able to engage in full time work due to the demands of the placement (frequent exclusions from school; specialist appointments or other commitments). But not all foster parents receive high levels of financial support. Ensuring reimbursements for expenses and damages occur in a timely way can be especially important for these carers.

Other practical supports include the use of respite, support with transport and with securing specialist therapeutic input and support.

While it is generally accepted that the use of frequent respite is not in the child's best interests; this must be balanced against the foster parent's legitimate need to 'refresh' from time to time. Respite arrangements should be predictable, and as routine and familiar to the child as possible. It is reasonable, however, to expect that there will be times when an emergency breaks is needed, and it is important to plan for this contingency from the beginning of placement. While it is generally better to ask a foster parent to transport a child to appointments when needed; there may also be legitimate reasons for providing practical alternatives that don't involve the carers (for example when this makes visitation access with biological family more volatile). Most children with developmental difference due to early adversity will be connected to a range of specialists (e.g., psychology, speech, occupational therapy, paediatricians, and psychiatrists). It is important to consider the significant benefits of this specialist input and provide the necessary supports (whether practical or financial) to ensure that the child's developmental concerns are addressed.

Key questions to ask about practical supports

- What practical supports does this family need?
- What aspects of practical support could others help with?
- How can the practical support to this family be improved?
- What systems barriers exist to offering practical supports and how can these be addressed?

Quality of Relationships

Above all, caring for a foster child is a *relational* experience. Foster parents are constantly 'giving' to a child who may be traumatised or have other high needs. Foster parents also need quality relationships that nurture and sustain them; so that they are able to nurture their child in turn.

Foster parents' relationships can be damaged or strained through the process of becoming a foster parent. Many friends do not understand the dynamics of foster family life and it is common for foster families to become more isolated once they become foster carers. This could be due to their child's behaviour limiting their ability to go out, socialise, or engage in community activities; or because their friends do not really understand the special needs of their child. Foster parents' marital relationships can become strained due to the demands of caring for a child with developmental difference.

As part of your support role, it is important to identify and foster supportive, high quality, and nurturing relationships for the foster parent and the foster family. This includes identifying and strengthening potential supportive relationships within the family's existing networks; and also building in professional supports where needed. It can be helpful to identify supportive people in the family network that can offer brief respite and emotional support. This may mean putting in place applications

for administrative/ probity clearances well ahead of time to ensure that a respite network is available when needed. Foster parents are clear in what they want from a support worker- they value workers who understand the limitations of the child protection system; and the challenges of caring for a child who has developmental difference or trauma. It is especially important for new workers to develop their understanding of the difficulties of being a foster parent, through seeking out supervision, or attending foster parent support groups. While Psychologists and Social workers can have very well developed skills in counselling and therapy; they may have very little understanding of the impact of the child protection system on foster families. Developing this understanding should be a focus of supervision and professional development for *any professional* working in this area.

Key questions to ask about Quality Relationships

- Do I understand my family's support needs?

- How supportive and understanding is the family's wider network?

- Who is best placed to provide emotional support to this family?

- How does fostering affect the parents' relationship?

- Who can be enlisted to provide support to this family?

- How can I develop a better understanding of the emotional support needs of this family?

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