



# Foster Carers' Training and Support Needs

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## ***Aim***

The aim of this study was to find out in some depth what foster carers think of current training provision and what they report they need in terms of training and support. This was done in order to explore why course attendance is often poor and to help develop foster carers' training and support provision in Fife.

## ***Method***

Two focus groups were carried out, one in Glenrothes (Group 1) and one in Dunfermline (Group 2) in February 2009. Each was attended by 5 foster carers. They were facilitated by two researchers from Playfield Institute. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. A topic guide devised by the researchers was used to guide discussion (see Appendix 1).

## ***Results***

### **Training courses attended**

Some participants had not attended any courses recently. Other participants had attended various courses including Springfield courses. Particular mention was made of courses on:

- Resilience
- Contact with Birth Families
- Eating Disorders
- Children with severe difficulties
- Attachment disorder
- Child protection
- Child protection at Napier University

The main points they made about training they had attended are outlined below:

- They generally liked courses run by Springfield project  
*"They [the Springfield training courses] are the best ones I have been to"*
- They often found courses informative and helpful  
*"There were clinical doctors there, psychologists there, so we got lots of feedback there, but I am talking about people with placements with severe difficulties....it was really good and it really helped and met what we are dealing with, yeah"*
- They liked the courses which had a more a relaxed style, e.g. discussion round a table as opposed to just information-provision  
*"That was a good one [Eating Disorders Course], it was just round a table and people discussed which I find you get more information from that as opposed to somebody standing with one of those flip charts telling you stuff and trying to take a lot of information in on one day"*
- They found some training quite repetitive
- They found some training too basic, particularly for the more experienced carers
- One carer talked about the need to find courses further afield because of having very difficult placements and nothing advanced enough available in Fife

*"A lot of them are just common sense, eh. I mean I have been a carer for lots of years and a lot of the courses I find are repetitive, they repeat all the time and I have no time for that so I go further afield."*

## **Views on the need for training & support for foster carers.**

### **Training**

The foster carers in both groups agreed that they liked being offered training courses in general and they all felt they would benefit from courses even though, in both groups, they had a wide range of experience of fostering from a few months to over 20 years.

*"I think that we all need training because we come across so many different kids with so many different needs. As a normal family you don't have these issues, it is totally different from having your own kids. They have got different needs, different issues, and you do need the training to deal with it."*

### **Support**

However, both groups suggested that they had an even greater need for support from other foster carers, either as part of the design of training courses or as a separate support network.

*"You need to speak to people who have been there and done it, who have had the experience."*

*"You wait until you get to boiling and think I just can't go on and it should be in place before it even gets to this stage. You should have someone. Like me, I had to phone and say take him, I am not doing this and that is when they stepped in to help, when I said I can't cope with this anymore."*

Some of the foster carers discussed the potential benefits of developing a booklet containing contact information about other foster carers and how many years experience they have and what kind of placements they have dealt with. They felt that it would be particularly important for new carers to have formal links to more experienced carers.

*"My ideal thing and I have brought this up many a time, every carer gets a brochure with things in it that are relevant to foster carers only.....a network of people [other foster carers] that any one of us can phone up at any time, 24/7..... We are all foster carers and all doing the same job and we have all, well most of us, have dealt with different things - sexual abuse, kids with ADHD, kids with disabilities, so you are all in the same job but some have got a wee bit more experience."*

*"That should be put in place when a new carer comes in all the time. It is good to go to someone so that if you have got a problem you can speak to someone and you can phone them and talk about it and go through it. You are kind of left there on your own."*

Both groups enjoyed meeting on the day of the focus groups and felt they benefited from the discussion. They reported that they would really appreciate having peer support sessions set up for them by link workers.

*"Groups like this with a crèche, like smaller groups where you feel you could learn more cause people are getting to speak more about their experiences, like [Foster Carer] will know a lot more than I do and be able to teach me a lot more. I feel I could learn a lot more from [foster carer] than going on a course."*

### **Design of training programme**

Both groups talked about how they would like training to be designed to meet their needs. They talked about how they liked to learn, the topics they were interested in and the practicalities of attending.

#### **Learning style**

Some foster carers discussed how they preferred and wanted training which involved discussing real life issues and how workers and other carers have dealt with them.

*"She [trainer] had a lot of stories again with her experiences out in the community and stuff which were quite helpful"*

They also suggested the possibility of a basic course (possibly two days in length) for new foster carers covering various topics.

*"I think for new carers, a beginners course and cover a wee bit of everything in it so that they have got some kind of knowledge of X, Y and Z."*

One of the carers talked about the library at Playfield Institute and how useful it was to be able to get books sent to their home. Some carers talked about online learning and how it would be very practical for them to work through courses in the evening, online.

#### **Topics**

They discussed various topics that they would like to have training on, i.e.

- Aggressive behaviour
- Knowledge of drugs used to treat behavioural problems
- ADHD
- Social Withdrawal
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Trauma / Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse

- Dyslexia / Learning Disabilities

*"I now have a boy with Asperger's and I don't know the first thing about it - that is not to say that I can not cope with it, I am coping with him. But how much does he actually take in? That is more the points that I want to know so that is what I would go for some training on."*

Some carers did not come up with any particular topics. They just said that a wide range of understanding of difficult behaviours was required. Both groups emphasised a strong need for courses on how to manage their own stress levels and maintain their own wellbeing.

*"We are always focussed so much on the kids that sometimes you don't think about yourself and the best way to deal with stress."*

### **Practicalities of attending**

There was a great deal of discussion in both groups about the practicalities of attending courses. In both groups there was unanimous agreement about the main reasons that made it difficult to attend training.

- Playfield Institute is too far away for them

*"I have never been on the Springfield training but I would quite like to do it but I would not like to have to travel all the way to Cupar."*

- Lack of childcare facilities provided by training. They had great problems finding someone able to look after their children while they were on training, especially if they have several placements. Being paid for childminding is not enough because it is so difficult to find someone suitable, particularly for new foster carers who have not yet built up a network of other foster carers they can call on.
- The timing of the training courses was often difficult - starting too early and finishing too late for them to manage school run.

A few carers talked about not knowing when they would receive information about training and one foster carer said that, until recently, she had not received information about what training was available.

Two carers talked about being told off at meetings or training events because no one ever attends. They felt this was unfair because it should not be directed at them.

*"It was always us that was getting the lectures and they went quite heady into it sometimes. I thought, well I am here and I made arrangements. And whatever."*

#### **How to make it easier for them to attend**

- Courses should be held all over Fife
- Provision of facilities to look after their placements to allow them to attend
- Four weeks notice ahead of training courses to make arrangements
- Handouts from all courses, those attended and not
- Hold courses at different times during the day as no 'one size fits all'. Some may find evening classes easier whereas others would find this impossible.

*"What is good for one might just be totally wrong for another."*

#### **Conclusion**

The foster carers appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experiences, views and needs at the focus groups. It is clear that although they have enjoyed many of the courses they have attended, and have found them helpful, they feel the course times and venues are not being designed to meet their needs. They would welcome a variety of course timings and venues and more support to organise childcare.

A strong message that came across in both groups, although not prompted, was that the courses are good, but are not enough to provide them with the support they need to manage their placements and their own stress levels.

They expressed the need for more informal discussion on real life issues during courses; a basic introductory course for new foster carers; a formal network of support from more experienced foster carers; peer support groups; more advanced courses for experienced foster carers; different learning opportunities, e.g. online materials and books; and courses targeted at their own stress and wellbeing.



## ***Appendix 1***

Topic guide for interviews with foster carers

### ***Foster Carers' Training and Support Needs***

#### ***Introduction***

Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed.

Aim: to find out what foster carers need in terms of training and support and what they think of current training provision

We are very interested to know what you think and feel to help us develop foster carers support services in Fife

Seek permission for taping  
Explain confidential storing of data; anonymity

#### ***Questions to initiate discussion***

**Tell me about any training courses you have attended.**

*Prompts: What did you expect? How did you think you would benefit? What happened at the course? Did it meet your needs?*

**Tell me about any training courses you are aware of that you have not attended.**

*Prompts: Why not? Topic? Practicalities of attending, trainers, anything other reasons for not attending?*

**Tell me about your views on the need for training/support for foster carers.**

*Prompts: Is it needed? If so, why? If not, why not?*

**How would you design a training programme to meet the information and support needs of foster carers like yourselves?**

*Prompts: topics? Trainers? Setting? Timing? Group size? Style of learning preferred? Core training needs? Additional modules for certain groups?*





**Can you tell me a little more about the topics you have identified as important? What do you feel you need to know about these issues / techniques?**

*Prompts:*

**Can you tell me what would help you attend a training programme like you have described? What could we do to make it easy and practical for you to attend?**

*Prompts:*

**Do you have anything else you want to say about your experiences, needs or wishes as a foster carer?**

Thank you very much for your time.

