

Men Who Foster

A guide to setting up support groups for male foster carers

The Fostering Communities Programme

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About The Fostering Network

[The Fostering Network](#) is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are the essential network for fostering, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered young people. We support foster carers to transform young people's lives and we work with fostering services and the wider sector to develop and share best practice. We work to ensure all fostered young people experience stable family life and we are passionate about the difference foster care makes. We champion fostering and seek to create vital change, so that foster care is the very best it can be.

We have been leading the fostering agenda for more than 40 years, influencing and shaping policy and practice at every level. As a membership organisation we bring together individuals and services involved in providing foster care across the UK. We have approximately 60,000 individual members and nearly 400 organisational members, both local authorities and independent fostering providers, which cover 75 per cent of foster carers in the UK. Our views are informed by our members, as well as through research; in this way we aim to be the voice of foster care.

About the Fostering Communities programme

Fostering Communities is a national programme of improvement and support led by The Fostering Network in Wales and funded by the Welsh Government from 2020 – 2023. The programme supports looked after children and their foster families throughout Wales, by improving wellbeing outcomes for children and increasing the competence, confidence, and motivation of the fostering workforce.

The programme is underpinned by a fostering community shared power model (or co-production). It's built around workstreams and interventions, which will aim to improve wellbeing, in line with the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

About this guide

This guide has been written as part of The Fostering Network's Fostering Communities programme, to meet a need that has been raised with The Fostering Network over many years. The need for (newly approved) male foster carers to have a safe, engaging forum to share and discuss their concerns, joys and questions about being a foster carer.

The guide has been written by two experienced male foster carers, in conjunction with a number of other male foster carers who are part of The Fostering Network's Foster Carers' Advisory Forum. This group of men was made up of experienced and newly approved foster carers. Together, they shaped the tone and content of the guide.

The intention of the guide is to provide a starting point for establishing a network of male foster carer support groups within a fostering service. The primary audience is intended to be newly approved male foster carers, but there is no desire to exclude more experienced foster carers as long as the balance of the group is maintained.

As this is intended to be a peer support group run by male foster carers *for* male foster carers, the ideas in the guide are there as starting points. The most successful groups will be the ones that have the most ownership by the group.

About the authors

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Stuart and his family are proud to be involved in fostering and it has changed their lives in many ways. Stuart has a background working as a support worker, where in this role he worked with many care experienced young adults who were an inspiration to him. Stuart works as an associate for The Fostering Network and delivers The Skills to Foster training to prospective carers.

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Introduction

Being a foster carer is incredibly rewarding, but it can also be extremely challenging. It can push you out of your comfort zone, stretch your parenting skills and strain your emotions in a way that few other 'jobs' can. And, at the same time, there are not many people who understand what you are going through. Some of this lack of understanding is because you can't always share what's going on because of confidentiality; some is because of a misconception people have of fostering; and some is because it's probably true to say that unless you've been a foster carer, you can't fully understand what foster carers experience.

Whatever the reason, fostering can be a lonely role – yet, because of its challenges, it's vitally important that foster carers have a support network around them, helping them practically and emotionally. Over the years, at The Fostering Network we have heard from male foster carers time and again that they feel isolated; that they struggle to build relationships with other foster carers and that they bottle up their emotions because there's no-one to share them with. We also hear – and this is a generalisation but appears to be the case – that female foster carers, who tend to be less likely to combine fostering with another job, find it easier to attend support groups and build relationships with other foster carers.

Male foster carers *NEED* support and we believe that other male foster carers are best placed to do this. We would like to see networks of support groups for male foster carers established across Wales. We hope that this resource to help establish support groups primarily aimed at newly approved foster carers will

Whilst these support groups will benefit the male foster carers who attend, we also believe that participation can result in better experiences and outcomes for the children in their care. Male foster carers have a vital role to play in the lives of the children in their care – whether they consider themselves to be a primary carer or 'simply' supporting their partner as the main foster carer. We hope that these groups will reinforce the importance of positive male role models.

The ideas in this guide are intended as a starting point. They do not need to be followed to the letter. In fact, we anticipate that each group will help shape the format and content of their group to best suit members' needs.

Thank you for picking up this resource. We hope your newly approved foster carers enjoy the group and feel the benefits of being part of an ongoing support group.

We would love to hear from you if you have a 'men who foster' support group that is working well, or if you establish one using this guide.

For more information about this toolkit and the Fostering Communities programme, please email the programme team:

- [Maria Boffey](#) – Head of Operations for Wales
- [Charlotte Wooders](#) - Project Manager

What is a support group?

A support group is a group of people with similar goals and experiences who provide each other with guidance, advice, and practical and emotional support. Support groups are a place for people to get things off their chest and get advice from others who have been through similar things. Attendees of a support group with similar challenges come together to share ways to navigate their situations and to feel a sense of community. Good support groups have structures in place to create physical and emotional safety. They enable peers to develop meaningful connections with each other and allow members to express and be themselves.

In this case, it's a place where newly approved male foster carers can share information, get confirmation that their feelings are 'normal', educate others or 'just let off steam'.

Setting up a support group

This guide is about setting up a support group that is primarily intended for newly approved male foster carers. How often you set up such a group will depend on how many foster carers you recruit through the year. Ideally, each group will have six to eight people in it.

Depending upon the needs of your service, you should seek to include male kinship carers within these groups as well. Or you may wish to establish support groups exclusively for kinship carers, as they will share similar experiences.

Depending on what other support groups you already have established within your fostering service, you may wish to invite more experienced male foster carers to join each group you set up. We would recommend having at least two or three experienced male carers within each group (two to run the group) as they will bring their knowledge to benefit the group. We would also recommend not having more experienced male carers than there are newly approved carers, as this can change the dynamics of the group.

Here are some points to think about before setting up your group:

- **How often should the group meet?** We'd suggest that your first three sessions take place once a month. This helps build up momentum, but also to allow time between the sessions for reflection.
- **Where should the meeting place be?** Ideally in a place that you have easy/free access to, such as a room within a fostering service office or council building. However, you may decide there's a room in a pub or café that could work, especially after the first three

sessions. Of course, being in a public space raises questions about how you will maintain confidentiality, so a private room somewhere is a good option.

- **Are your meetings going to be virtual or in-person?** We would strongly suggest face-to-face, but sometimes geography and Covid restrictions mean virtual meetings are the most suitable options.
- **If virtual, what is the best way to communicate?** Zoom, Facetime or Microsoft Teams. The Fostering Network has some [useful factsheets](#) about how to use the tools most effectively.
- **Who will run the sessions?** See page 7.
- **What time should the group meet and how long for?** The first three sessions are intended to be 90 minutes. We think that's about right for a session, but the group members may have their own ideas. We would suggest a 7.45pm start (it allows for the men to be around to help put younger children to bed), but speak to the group to hear their ideas for the most suitable time. Whatever time you choose, it is important to start and finish promptly.
- **What are the ground rules?** See page 9.
- **How will we communicate?** If the members of the group are willing to share their details, setting up a [WhatsApp group](#) (or similar) is a great way of keeping in touch between sessions.
- **What will happen between sessions?** We hope that these groups will create relationships where the members want to meet up outside of the sessions. Ideally, this might mean meeting up, along with the children in their care, doing a shared activity.
- **Who should cover the costs?** As this will be a support group under the auspices of a fostering service, we would suggest that the service covers the cost of room hire, materials and refreshments. If the group decides, for example, that they would like to carry on meeting in a pub or restaurant, then it is reasonable for members to cover the cost of their meal and drinks.

Encouraging men to join the group

We are very aware that many foster carer support groups are either poorly attended or have stopped because of low attendance. For these newly-formed support groups, we would suggest two things to encourage attendance:

- **Structure and clear purpose:** For optimum discussions and openness, session structure helps to ensure that the meeting time is well used. It is worth emphasising that the structure and ideas are simply there as a guide. What is important is that the group take time to get to know each other, trust each other and become a support for each other. This will mean that each session will need to be flexible and adapt to the needs of the group as a whole, as well as the individuals within it.
- **Compulsory few sessions:** You can politely make it clear that there is an expectation members will attend the first few sessions, and that they can use attendance at the group as part of their continual professional development.

Who should run the group?

There are a couple of possible options as to who should run the group:

- A male social worker and an experienced male foster carer
- Two experienced male foster carers

Whatever you decide, we think there should be at least one experienced male foster carer as a facilitator. They will have greater empathy with the group members and be able to offer experience-based advice. This foster carer may require training in group facilitation. For more information about what training The Fostering Network can offer, please contact wales@fostering.net.

If the group is led by two male foster carers, without a social worker, there may be a greater openness in the group, especially regarding struggles they are having. However, it will need to be agreed what, if any, the feedback mechanism from the group to the fostering team will be (considering confidentiality). This will need to be made clear to the group from the outset. At the end of each session, it will need to be discussed amongst the group if any issues or questions need to be referred to the fostering team, as per the agreed feedback mechanism.

With any ongoing issues, the foster carer leaders will need to agree with the fostering manager a 'rolling agenda' between the group and the fostering team. This ensures that any matters on the agenda are constructively fed back and resolved to mutual satisfaction. The raising of any safeguarding issues during the meeting will be dealt with within the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#). Any immediate 'at risk' safeguarding information will require an immediate referral to social services or the relevant out of hours service. In this situation, you should also inform the relevant staff members within the fostering service.

It is important that there is a mechanism in place for the foster carer facilitators to get answers to questions that come up in the sessions. They can then provide answers from the fostering service in the next session or via the WhatsApp group where appropriate. This should include a social worker who is 'linked' to the group and is able to provide support and advice as required. Fosterline Wales is also a good resource for facilitators to get support about fostering issues. (See page 24 for contact details).

Whoever leads the group – whether it's a social worker or foster carer – there are some criteria that you should consider looking for:

- Some experience of leading/facilitating groups
- A flexible approach
- Warm and approachable
- Positive and enthusiastic about fostering
- A good listener
- A clear communicator
- Time to prepare.

Depending on your service's policy, if it is foster carers leading the group you should also consider what their financial compensation will be. They should also use their leading of the group as evidence for their continual professional development.

Some facilitation tips

If you are going to be running the group and this is your first time doing something like this, here are some tips to help make the sessions as useful as possible:

- Follow the session outlines – we have tried to make the sessions as simple as possible to run, so try to follow our session plans. of course, you will want to allow some freedom for the group to create its own agenda, but for these first three sessions we would strongly suggest sticking closely to our plan.
- Get yourself ready - make sure you know who is coming to group and a little about them. And try to get some rest so that you have plenty of energy to facilitate the group.
- Set up the room to create the right environment – try to create plenty of space and if possible, light.
- Set expectations from the outset – make it clear that the success of the group will rely on all attendees being willing to participate and share their experiences and concerns.
- Manage participation – everyone joins in groups differently and have varying communication styles. Try to draw out the quieter participants, especially in the pairs/group work by asking them directly what they think about a particular issue. Some people like to be forewarned, so it can work to say something like, ‘Michael, I’ll be coming to you after we’ve heard from Hamid as we’re keen to hear your thoughts.’ You can also ask a quieter person to write on whiteboards, be a timekeeper and so on.
- Vary your style - Our session plans encourage different ways of working, but try to mix it up to include all group discussion, pairs, small group work, work around a flip chart or white board and so on.
 - Stick to the time agreed – even if you’re having the best discussion, make sure you start and finish on time.
 - Deal with challenging behaviour – see page 9.
 - Use the car park technique – this is a tactic where you agree to ‘park’ off-topic questions, issues or concerns on a board for later discussion at a more appropriate time. Say something like, ‘This is an important issue, but can we park it for later/next week/discussion outside of the group...’.
 - **Question types** - there are lots of different ways to ask questions as a facilitator. Here are some of the most useful:
 - **Open questions** encourage people to talk compared to closed questions which close the conversation down. Examples include:
 - ‘Tell me more...’
 - ‘Say more about that.’
 - ‘What do you think?’
 - **Framing questions** are used to draw out information such as:
 - ‘Could you tell me more about that?’
 - ‘In what ways...what have you in mind?’

- **Clarifying questions** help to focus on certain issues and provide clarification for the facilitator and the group:
 - ‘So, what you are saying is...?’
 - ‘What do you mean by that...?’
 - ‘Can you give me a concrete example of what you mean?’
 - ‘I don’t know much about this subject, could you tell us more about it?’
- **Challenging/ probing questions:**
 - ‘What led you to come to that conclusion?’
 - ‘What did you learn from that?’
 - ‘Why do you think that?’

Ground rules

It can sometimes feel as if ground rules are over-the-top for a support group such as this, but it is always important to establish some rules to ensure the group runs smoothly, respects privacy and help to avoid problems or conflict. The ground rules are likely to be respected more if the group has been involved in deciding them, so the first session includes some time to do this. Some examples of the sort of rules you might like to discuss can be found [here](#).

Ground rules can be added to or altered as the group progresses, and it’s worth recapping them very briefly at the start of each session, especially if you have new members.

One rule that should be essential is confidentiality. It is important that everyone agrees to respect the confidentiality of others so that members feel that the group is a safe and supportive environment. You may want to give some thought to putting a confidentiality statement in place that all members must sign up to. This should include a statement that all personal information will be treated as confidential and only passed on when agreed by the individual or when an adult/child may be at risk. The raising of any safeguarding issues during the meeting will be dealt with within the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#) and any immediate ‘at risk’ safeguarding information will require an immediate referral to social services or the relevant out of hours service. You should also make the relevant people in your fostering service aware.

Challenging behaviour

Hopefully this won’t be the case for your group, but you might find that some members of your group don’t get on or that one member is unnecessarily disruptive to the point of negatively impacts on the group. Here are some techniques to deal with that situation, should it arise:

- Think before you react – pause to manage your emotions.
- Remind the group of the ground rules they have agreed on.
- Speak to the individual before or after the session as they may not realise that they are behaving inappropriately or you may have misunderstood what they were trying to say.
- Interrupt politely someone who might be causing offence to others and discreetly turn the conversation to something positive that has happened.
- Ensure that the facilitator of the group gives everyone equal speaking time.

There are no hard or fast rules about what will or won’t work. Effective responses depend on the particular style, skills and experience of the facilitator as well as the unique blend of the group. In general be calm, respectful, constructive and flexible. Remember you can’t always

get it right. Don't be hard on yourself if you mis-time an intervention. Try to learn from it (perhaps through a discussion with the social worker who is linked to the group, or with your supervising social worker) and move on.

- **Some helpful phrases:**

- **If a group member is asking a challenging or difficult question**
 - 'I don't know/I am not aware of that – rather than give you inaccurate information, I will find out and let you know next time.'
 - 'That's a good point, I'm not sure of the answer. Leave it with me.'
 - 'What do other people think?'
- **If someone makes a racist/homophobic/sexist comment**
 - 'Thanks for your contribution and just to say for everyone's benefit, we don't use that word/terminology anymore.'
 - 'I think what you just said some people might find offensive.'
 - 'I would like to ask what you think the impact of your view would be on looked after children or young people.'
- **If there is strong disagreement between group members**
 - 'I can see/hear that there is a real difference of opinion here.'
 - 'This is often a topic that leads to a clash of views.'
 - 'Rather than spend any more group time on this I think it would be helpful to find out what the service policy states about this.'
 - 'We may need to agree to differ and move on now.'
- **If group members are getting upset or annoyed**
 - 'Sometimes when we talk about this it brings up strong emotions'
 - 'I don't know about anyone else but I observe that people may be feeling uncomfortable right now?'
 - 'So what you are feeling is...'
 - 'Clearly you feel strongly about...'
 - 'That sounds difficult – it would be a good idea if you raised that with your supervising social worker – would you like me to raise it with them too?'
- **If a group member who is talking too much**
 - 'Can I just stop you there? (can hold your hand up in a stop sign to emphasise you want them to stop)
 - 'What do other people think?'

The first three sessions

As we have already mentioned, the support group needs to be just that – a support. That means there needs to be a significant degree of flexibility and adaptability in each session. If a member comes along with a particular challenge or problem they want to talk about, the leaders of the group should allow (where appropriate) a good amount of time for discussion about that problem – even if it means other things they had planned have to be postponed until future sessions. The skill of the leader will be to decide how long to allow that discussion to go on for, and to remind the group of issues of confidentiality and so on.

Providing *too* rigid a structure for the first three sessions may be unhelpful. Therefore, we have provided a fairly detailed outline for session one and then a range of ideas for sessions two, three and onwards. Feel free to choose one or two of those ideas for each session, or to be led by the group as to what they would like to do. It is important that there is always a

plan for each session (there's nothing more off-putting than attending a group with no content planned), but that there's sufficient flexibility to be led by the needs of the group.

SESSION 1

About this session

Session one is about welcoming group members, introductions, and agreeing some basic ground rules. We will then encourage group members to share their personal motivations for becoming foster carers and anything else group members feel is relevant in their journey.

The aim of the support group is to be an informal meeting with other male carers - an opportunity to make friendships and to share some of the highs and challenges of the role. We have set an agenda with some suggested discussion points and timings to help with the delivery of the sessions. We have also included some home practice that you may find useful.

Please don't underestimate the importance of refreshment breaks. These allow time for members to socialise and get to know each other.

Leaders' notes

1. Welcome

- Thank the group members for their time attending the session and acknowledge how busy foster carers are.
- Group members may have come to the group straight after a day's work, others may have had to change plans such as the family evening routine. For some carers attending the session it could be a welcomed short break from childcare!
- The group leaders should introduce themselves and then outline the objectives for this first session (display slide 3).
- Ask the participants to introduce themselves using the format on slide 4.
 - Name
 - Where you're from?
 - When you were approved to foster?
 - Do you have any foster children living with you at the moment?

2. Ground rules

- Explain to the group that while we want to be able to support one another and have fun whilst doing so, it is important that we agree to some ground rules as a group.
- Display slide 5.
 - What rules do we need to put in place to make this a useful and safe space for all?
 - Some suggestions could be:
 - Honesty – This is an opportunity to speak freely about any issues.
 - Confidentiality – avoid using children's names as they have a right to confidentiality and make sure what is discussed in the room stays in the room (although see safeguarding below).

- Respect – We may disagree and have different experiences or viewpoints, but we can disagree with respect for one another.
- Safeguarding – we each have a responsibility to safeguard children and should pass on any information should we have concerns about a child's welfare or safety.

3. Getting to know you

- Foster carers are inspirational people, whether they recognise this about themselves or not. Children's lives are changed by the relationships, love, and time shared with foster families.

Explain to the group that everybody's life experience and decision-making process in becoming a foster carer/fostering family is completely unique. We may have a group member that had a friend in foster care as a child, others may have worked with children or maybe wanted to be able to work from home and balance family life by becoming foster carers. Sharing and hearing the experiences of other group members can be both motivating and bonding as we may have more in common with group members than we realise.

- Display slide 6.
 - What was your journey to fostering?
 - What was your motivation to foster?
 - How did you find the assessment process?
 - What are you excited about?
 - What are you worried about?
 - What has already had to change because of you becoming a foster carer? How do you feel about that?
 - What has surprised you the most about becoming a foster carer?
 - Have you considered stopping fostering at any point?

It may be helpful for the foster carer facilitator to share their experiences first. This will model the level of openness and the type of information we are looking for. If standing while delivering the presentation up until this point, it is a good idea to sit among the group members. This shifts the focus from the slides and onto the group members to comfortably discuss some of their experiences.

4. COFFEE BREAK

5. What would you like from the group?

- Display slide 7.

Explain to the group that this is meant to be a space to offer them peer support through their fostering journey. Ask them to share:

- Why have they come along to the group?
- Is anybody here unwillingly or was booked onto the course by a partner or supervising social worker?
- What topics they would like to discuss? Perhaps share the list of ideas for sessions two and three to see which of those they would prefer to focus on first.

- Explain that although there will be some planned content each session, they are encouraged to bring their own ideas, challenges and problems to discuss each time. The group is intended to be shaped by their needs – the planned content is simply there as conversation starters.

6. The reflective journal

- Display slide 8.
- Take five minutes to introduce the group to the [reflective journal](#). This journal is an account of own professional development but, more essentially, it is an opportunity to reflect on their learning experience. There is no right or wrong way of recording in their journal, as this should take account of their personal experience, preferred learning style and individual learning goals. The journal is primarily intended as a private space for personal reflection, consolidation and goal setting. This journal will be an important evaluation tool which will assist with their own professional development.

Engaging in a learning experience does not necessarily mean that learning has taken place - it is only through externalising the experience that you can begin to apply it to your fostering practice and experiences. This is where the journal can help, as it allows members to document what they are learning and help them to become more reflective in their daily practice.

- Reiterate that it is up to the group members whether they use the journal – it is one tool that they may wish to add to their reflective ‘toolbox’.

7. Home reflection

- Display slide 9.
 - Think about what activities you specifically do with a child in your life that enhances the relationship with that child.
 - How does that activity, time spent together, enhance your relationship? Please write something down and bring it to the next meeting. It can be anything, big or small.

8. Keeping in touch

- It is a good time to ask members if they would like to share their mobile phone number or email address, for the creation of a WhatsApp or email group. The first post could be a reminder of the home practice task.

IDEAS FOR SESSIONS 2 AND 3

Below are some ideas for sessions 2 and 3. There are too many ideas for you to cover them all in two sessions, and the members in the group may have ideas of what they would like to do. You can use any left-over ideas for future sessions, if the group decides to carry on beyond the initial three sessions.

Below is also an outline of how sessions 2 and 3 might look. It is there as a suggestion, so please feel free to adapt it and make it your own.

Whatever you decide to do in these sessions we would recommend having:

- Set some home reflection, to think about between sessions
- Time at the beginning to discuss the previous session's home reflection
- Plenty of time for a break
- Time to agree what could be on the agenda for the next session.

At the end of session 3, it would be good to allow some time to discuss the future of the group. Members have initially signed up for three sessions, but we hope that they will have seen the benefit of meeting together and want to continue meeting.

Use the last 10 minutes of session 3 to ask members:

- Would you like to carry on meeting?
- If so, how often would you like to meet and where? (In a pub, over a meal, rotating round people's houses, where you've been meeting already, etc?)
- Who would you like to run the group? (Perhaps a volunteer or two within the group to organise the practical arrangements and the agenda each time.)
- What would you like the agenda to be?
 - You don't need detailed agendas for each meeting, but an outline of what each session looks like. There will be a good number of the ideas below that you will not have used in sessions 2 and 3. You may want to suggest these as starting points for future sessions.
 - It is worth stressing that the most successful support groups always have an agenda and some discussion items or an external speaker, rather than simply turning up for a social occasion.
 - There should be opportunities for relationship building, general support and socialising, but some structure is vital for a fruitful group.

IDEA: Male role models

(NOTE: If you are going to use this idea, then it would be ideal to ask members to watch [this video](#) before coming along)

- Many male foster carers downplay their involvement in the family. We often hear men describe themselves as being employed and having a role outside of the home, therefore not being a foster carer. They may say 'my partner is the primary foster carer'.

Many carers who are not the primary/full time/stay at home carer may struggle to attend training courses or meetings with social workers because of their work commitments outside of the home.

The role male carers play is vital to children in foster care.

- Watch from 6:20 to 8.54 of [this video](#). Members should watch before attending, but it's good to remind them of by replaying the short clip.
- Ask the group to feedback their observations and feelings about the video. It may be useful to ask the group to consider if Mr Pigden is likely to view his role in Ian's childhood as significantly influential as Ian describes it. Ian says, 'I think about him every day'. Do you think it is likely that Mr Pigden feels he "was just doing his job"?
- Ask the group to reflect on and discuss the following (display slide 11)

1. What might children's experience of men have been prior to coming into foster care?
 - Some suggestions could be:
 - Absent
 - Intimidating/violent
 - Substance misuse issues
 - Children may feel let down by men and expect further rejection.

2. What role can you play in helping change some of children's thoughts about how men think and behave?
 - Some suggestions could be:
 - Develop relationships with the children and become a trusted adult - this takes time.
 - Investment of time, showing genuine interest in children: 'How was your day?'; or demonstrating that the child is important to you: 'I was thinking about you this afternoon, I hope your test at school went ok'.
 - Actions speak louder than words: 'Let's go and get you the trainers you need.'

IDEA: Creating a foster carer job description

- Display slide 12. Ask the participants to use the template below to work in small groups to develop a job advertisement and description for the vacancy of a foster carer. The group could think about the ideal candidate, hours of work, daily tasks, responsibilities, skills, experience required, salary etc.

Ask group members to feedback and take notes of some common themes. The observations are likely to centre on the varied skills that carers need to care for children in foster care. Foster carers do important work that often changes the lives of the children in their care - it is a hard job.

A foster carer job description	
Job title:	
Hours of work:	
Summary of role (in three bullet points):	
Daily tasks:	

Responsibilities:	
Skills required:	
Experienced required:	
Salary and other perks:	
Other:	

IDEA: Perceptions of male carers by society

- Ask members to split into three groups, each taking one of the below case studies (all of which are real life experiences). Give them five minutes to discuss.

Case studies

Next time your wife should do it

Steve and Grace have been fostering baby Fatima for three weeks. Although the relationship with Fatima’s parents is usually positive when they meet at the family centre, today things felt different. Grace is meeting a friend, so Steve has taken the day off work and has attended contact alone for the first time.

While chatting with Fatima's parents, her father suddenly asks Steve, 'Where is your wife today?'

Steve replies, 'Grace is busy today, so I am caring for Fatima.'

Dad asks, 'Did you dress the baby and change her nappy and clothing?'

Steve says that he did. Dad replies 'Next time your wife should do it.'

- What should Steve do? What should he say?
- What would you expect the contact supervisor to do or say?
- How might you feel if you were in this position?

Do you have a proper job?

James is on the school run and has a busy morning scheduled. He must drop in a permission slip to the school's office and then pick up the car from the garage. As he chats to the school secretary she says, 'You are the family that fosters aren't you? It's such a brilliant thing, it must be so rewarding.'

James nods politely. The secretary adds, 'I don't know how your partner does it, caring for all those children. Do you have a proper job, or do you just help with the fostering?'

- Have you experienced something similar?
- What is it about fostering that makes it 'not a proper job'?
- How would you respond?

She flies back on Monday

Perry and his wife Rachel have been asked to prepare for a new-born baby to come into their care. Their baby is due in three weeks. Here is Perry's account of what happened next:

'The family were all so excited, this is the first time we had cared for a baby. Rachel had travelled to Ireland to visit her Mum for the weekend. We knew we would soon be busy with the baby, so she booked a last-minute flight.'

It was about 6pm when the phone rang. The caller asked to speak to Rachel, I said she wasn't available. It was a social worker explaining that the baby had been born that day and would need us to attend the hospital first thing in the morning to get him. I explained that Rachel was away, that she would be back in a couple of days, but I could be at the hospital in the morning.

The social worker said they would ask a manager and get back to me. They weren't sure if we could start the placement as planned as Rachel wasn't here to collect the child. I explained, I am a foster carer too.'

- How might Perry feel after this phone call?
- What could be the underlying concern that the supervising social worker has to check with a manager? Is this a fair concern to hold?
- Come back as a group and ask for feedback from their case studies, but also encourage a wider discussion around the topic of gender stereotypes, males as foster carers and the perception of men that are foster carers. Use the following questions as prompts (Display slide 13):
 - How do you think society perceives male carers? Is it 'manly' enough?
 - How do you think your fostering service perceives male carers?
 - How will you handle the situations and comments raised in the three case studies?
 - How will you handle any stereotyping, such as the fostering service asking for your partner when they ring?

'An issue for mum'

Jamie, along with his husband Harjit, has been approved as a foster carer for three years. They have been caring for Nina since she was eight years old. Nina is a quiet but happy child who has a love of animals and enjoys regularly visiting the stables to care for Jamie's horse.

Nina has recently started her period. Jamie felt comfortable supporting her with this and was glad Nina shared this with him when they were at the stables one day. Nina has described being in lots of pain and has been crying this morning, she hasn't gone to school today. Jamie has called the GP surgery and Nina has had paracetamol but is still in pain. When the practice nurse calls back, she tells Jamie that, *'Nina doesn't need to see the GP, it's totally fine if she needs to stay at home for a day. I think this is an issue for mum to deal with. It's probably best if mum takes Nina to the pharmacy and you can discuss pain relief options. There is a consultation room, and the pharmacist on the high street is female.'* The call is abruptly ended.

- What are your thoughts about the conversation Jamie had with the practice nurse?
- How is Jamie likely to feel?
- Do you think Jamie dealt with this situation well, could he have done anything differently?

IDEA: Safer caring

- Foster carers are childcare experts. in the team which is responsible for ensuring children and young people in foster care thrive and reach their potential. They are required to deliver round-the-clock, highly personalised support and care within a professional framework in a family setting, meeting the emotional and physical needs of the child, in a way that safeguards the child and themselves.

Foster carers are experts in working with children who are likely to have experienced trauma, abuse or neglect. They are trained, supervised and accountable; they attend and participate in reviews, case conferences, court hearings and countless other meetings. As well as this, in many cases, foster carers know the children they are looking after better than any other professional. They are often the primary advocates for the children in their care in relation to education, health and their care plans.

Having said all this, one of the things that makes fostering unique is that it takes place in a family home. This means that things at home often have to change when a family starts fostering. Split the group into three and ask them to consider the case study 'Friday Film Night'. (15 mins)

Friday Film Night

Dominic and his partner Lisa are attending Skills to Foster™ training. Dominic is self-employed and occasionally works away during the week. He shares with the group, *'It kills me working away, I miss the kids and family life in the house, so I ring them before their bedtime. Ever since the kids were small, when I come home from working away the family ritual is Friday Film Night. On the drive back I call the kids and they tell me what takeaway they would like and they pick out a film for us too. As soon as I am home, I am in the shower and then we all get into the bed for the film. The takeaway is delivered and we all eat it under the covers. Lisa doesn't like the crumbs in the bed, but I don't care because it's lovely. Sometimes I fall asleep whilst watching the film, after a long drive and a week on a building*

site I can be tired. I would want to integrate any child that we cared for into our family routine, I wouldn't want to leave them out.'

- How will this need to change?
- What else have you had to change and how do you feel about it?

Bring the members back and ask for feedback. Lead on to a discussion about what is the difference between being risk aware/sensible and risk averse? The world is full of risks and having an awareness of safer caring strategies is essential for foster carers. However, this can only reduce the risks, it cannot remove them completely. The responsibility of caring for somebody else's child can sometimes prevent foster carers from allowing risks, they may think 'I'd let my own child, but not a foster child'. This can have serious repercussions for children and their relationships with the foster family.

Facilitate a discussion around the following questions (display slide 14):

- What are the risks that foster carers need to be aware of?
- What are the dangers of being risk averse? How might the child respond?
- Who bears the danger in being risk adverse vs risk aware? Compare this with the (real) risk of allegations.
- Why is it so important to have a safer caring policy for your household, to keep good records, and to know and listen to the child in your care?

Because safer caring is such an important issue, we have included more information below to help the group facilitators. We would suggest that if the group is being led by two male foster carers, they should talk to social workers prior to covering safer caring in the group. This will ensure that messages being given to new foster carers about safer caring are consistent with the fostering service's current policies and procedures.

The Fostering Network has a safer carer training course and safe caring publications. See The Fostering Network's website for more information on [Safer caring](#).

Risks

- Children who live with foster carers have often experienced care that is chaotic, neglectful, or abusive. They may expect this to continue while living with foster carers. Some children may want to recreate environments that they are familiar with. For example, they may feel comfortable with adults who shout lots so could push boundaries to see if they can get you to respond in a similar way. A child may wonder or even ask 'what do I have to do to get you to hit me?'. Exploring these boundaries in such a way could lead to risky behaviours from a child.
- In the matching process and before placing a child, it is crucial that all important information is shared so the carers understand the risk factors for a particular child, their family circumstances and history. For instance, is this the child's first time in foster care, and have they made a previous allegation? By discussing the specific needs of a child, the foster family can consider the needs of all family members and whether they have the skills and experience to care for them. This minimises the risk of a placement breaking down.

- Children who have not had their needs met or have been abused are vulnerable as they may be too trusting of strangers or accepting of relationships that could mean they are exploited.
- Children may run away or take part in dangerous activities such as underage sex. They may experiment with drugs and alcohol, or at risk of being groomed online or by a gang. All safeguarding issues and concerns need to be shared and discussed with other professionals.

Attitudes

- We can't shield children from risks completely and nor should we. The world is full of danger and childhood is an important stage where children prepare for adulthood, where they will make all the decisions about their own safety.
- Foster carers should strive towards the children in their care developing risk competence. Blanket bans towards risks are generally unhelpful and contradict the child-centred approach that is widely promoted.
- Being risk averse is to avoid risk rather than try to safeguard the child while they explore and *learn* about risk. Carers may believe a child is safer and it is more convenient to just say no. This is a short-term approach and does not enable children to take appropriate decisions about risk. Of course, what is an appropriate decision will vary from child to child.
- Foster carers, children, and social workers should all be involved in discussions about risk. All should try to see the potential learning and confidence building opportunities within an activity or event. Our approach to safeguarding should be child focused and about risk reduction (being 'risk sensible'), rather than removing risks entirely.

Allegations

- An allegation is the assertion from any person that the foster carer or household member has or may have behaved in a way that has/may have harmed a child, possibly committed a criminal offence against a child, or behaved towards a child in a way that indicates that they are unsuitable to work with children.
- Allegations are an occupational hazard of the foster carer role.
- Children make allegations for many different reasons –
 - In some cases, they are true. Sadly, we know there are instances where children have been assaulted, abused sexually or emotionally, or neglected by foster carers, so the allegation must be investigated.
 - Children in foster care may feel overwhelming emotions. They could feel they have very little control or power when it comes to their lives and where they live. They may feel the foster carers house rules and attitudes to risks are too restrictive. Any of these thoughts could lead to a child making an allegation.
 - A child may make an allegation to break down a placement, with the expectation they will be returned to their family home. This could be because they miss family members, or because they feel conflicted about having their needs met in the foster family, or because a family member has told them to make an allegation.

- A parent may make an allegation to express their anger about the situation, which gives them a sense of power in a very difficult situation for them. They could believe that if concerns are raised about the carers abilities to keep the child safe then maybe they could return home.

Discussing allegations can often raise concerns and anxieties. It is worth leaving plenty of time if this is a topic your group wishes to discuss. Remind the group that as members of The Fostering Network they have access to [Fosterline Wales](#) and a 24 hour legal helpline. Share this link with the group via WhatsApp or email: [The Fostering Network helplines | The Fostering Network](#)

House rules

- Safer caring policies and house rules are often most effective when the young people are involved in the discussions and decision making. Young adults will respect the rules and restrictions more if they understand the logic behind them.
- Asking children what they think fair treatment looks like and what they need to feel respected is a gentler approach. This will often achieve the same suggested house rules, the only differences being that the child feels involved, empowered and you get to avoid nagging.

Record keeping

The importance of accurate recordings cannot be underestimated, but to foster carers it can be seen as another chore. It may be useful to remind the group that recordings serve multiple purposes:

- They act as a reminder that benefits the foster carer about medical appointments or phone calls to other professionals.
- Solicitors may submit carers recordings as evidence when making a recommendation to court about a child's future.
- At some point in the future the child may request to read their care file, so bear in mind that the child may read recordings.

Also see *The Fostering Network's website*: thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/being-foster-carer/record-keeping

IDEA: Home reflection

- Ask the group to spend time reflecting on what being child-centred really means.
- What are the benefits of child-centred care?
- Can you think of a time when you have particularly demonstrated a child-centred approach? Keep an eye out for an example from the coming week or two before our next session.

IDEA: The place of emotions in fostering

- Being a foster carer is an emotional role. Love is an obvious fostering-related emotion - children and young people in your care need to feel loved. But there are so many more emotions. Men are not always great at expressing them, and some foster carers have concerns about being too emotional in front of social workers in case they are perceived

as 'not being strong enough' to foster. It can also be perceived that men ought to be seen as being 'strong' within the family unit.

- How would you describe how you express your emotions? Explain that there are lots of ways to categorise people when it comes to expressing their emotions – none of the categories are 'better' than the others. But it is helpful to understand which group you most closely fit into so that you can be self-aware. Ask the group to take a couple of minutes to reflect on which of the emotional types on slide 15 they think they best fit into. Then think about which group their partner, children or parents might fit into.
- Display slide 15.
 - The intellectual - This person is extremely bright, often relying more on facts than feelings. Intellectuals think more logically and analytical. In highly emotional situations, they're able to remain calm and think clearly.
 - The empath - This individual is highly sensitive and attuned to feelings of others. If you're happy, they're happy — and if you're sad, they're sad. Empaths are also very good listeners.
 - The rock - Just as the name implies, this person has considerable emotional resilience. They often appear as the pillar of strength in stressful situations. While others may seem unable to manage their emotions, the rock is often cool and calm.
 - The gusher - Unlike the intellectual and the rock, the gusher isn't against crying, screaming, yelling, or shouting during stressful times. The gusher has no problem sharing how they feel in any situation.
- In what ways do you think fostering will challenge your emotions?
 - Watch from 3.14-5.14 of [this video](#).
 - In small groups of three or four discuss how fostering has already challenged your emotions, or how you think it might.
 - Some suggestions might be:
 - Anger – with birth family, the system, children, courts, adopters
 - Worry – what is going to happen to the child when they leave
 - Upset – when a child moves on
 - Judgementalism – with birth family
 - Ask for feedback and, if appropriate, share from your own experience as a foster carer.
- As a whole group, ask the question 'how will you deal with your emotions?'. For example, how will you ensure anger or judgementalism towards birth family members doesn't impact on relationships?
- Then ask, 'what do you think are the benefits of expressing emotions in a reasonable way for the children in our care?'
 - Talk about the importance of modelling being open, but also being calm and controlled.
 - This is a good time to remind the group of attachment theory:
 - Children need a relationship with a caregiver who is sensitive and responsive, who comforts the child when distressed and enables them to feel safe enough to relax, play and learn. This is the basis of a secure attachment.
 - Attachments are formed during the first year of life, even in the context of maltreatment. However, such attachments are more likely to be disorganised.

- Developing a secure attachment with a substitute carer is key to improving outcomes for these children. The emotional and behavioural strategies children use to protect themselves, however, puts them at risk of being rejected by others and can affect all relationships.
- Children who are securely attached have higher self-esteem and empathy, and can deal with stress more effectively.

(Taken from [02. Attachment theory and research | Fostering and Adoption \(rip.org.uk\)](#))

IDEA: Your support network

- Given the importance of being able to deal with the emotions that fostering will bring, it is vitally important that all foster carers have an active support network.
- Ask each person to write their name in the middle of a piece of paper. Then around their name, write the names of other people who they could turn to for support. The nearer the person's name is to their name, the greater support they think that person could offer. This should include their supervising social worker, fostering buddy/mentor (if they have one), their partner, family members, friends and so on. (Display slide 16 as an example.)
- Now in threes or fours, ask members to consider whether they think this support network is sufficient and ask:
 - What are the confidentiality issues with each person you have identified? How does this impact on the support that person can offer and the relationship you have with them?
 - 'Do your friends "get" your fostering; and if not, why not?'
- Ask for brief feedback from the group. Use this as an opportunity to underline the impact of confidentiality on friends' understanding, and the importance of having a support network that really understands fostering – which ultimately means other foster carers.

POSSIBLE OUTLINES FOR SESSIONS 2 AND 3

Session 2

- Welcome and discussion about home reflection
- Creating a foster carer job description
- Perceptions of male carers by society
- Coffee break
- Being a male role model
- Home practice

Session 3

- Welcome and discussion about home reflection
- The place of emotions in fostering
- Coffee break
- Your support network
- What next? (slide 17)

Certificates

Certificates of attendance are available from The Fostering Network. These will provide evidence of continual professional development in the members' first year of fostering. Email wales@fostering.net to request some certificates for your group.

What next?

Session three includes a brief discussion with the attendees about what they would like to happen to the group going forward. We would suggest having an expectation that the group will continue in some form or other. Hopefully the members who have attended will also want this to happen, having seen the value of meeting with, learning from and supporting one another.

If a WhatsApp or email group hasn't already been established, then now would be a good time to do that if members are in agreement. It is worth setting some ground rules for what the group is for – keep it fostering related (for example, it's not a group to be sending round cat videos...unless they're fostering cats of course!), keep it polite and so on.

We would suggest that members decide how often they want to meet and where, as well as who will run the group (both in terms of the practical arrangements and during the actual meeting). We would recommend that each meeting has an agenda with a topic of conversation or some input from an external speaker, as well as opportunities for relationship building, general support and socialising.

Feedback

We would very much like to hear from you if you have made use of this guide. What has worked well and not so well? How have the male foster carers found the discussion ideas? What will your next steps be? How could The Fostering Network be of help going forward? Please email us at wales@fostering.net with any thoughts, comments or feedback. Thank you.

Further support from The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up to date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

[Fosterline Wales](#) Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday. If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible. You can email us at: fosterlinewales@fostering.net

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs. For more information contact our Learning and Development Manager, Sarah Mobedji at sarah.mobedji@fostering.net.

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