



# **Walking Tall**

**A report capturing our consultation work with primary school-aged children living in fostering households in Scotland**

**March 2019**

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the amazing children who took part in our Walking Tall consultation workshops, as well as the Walking Tall steering group for your commitment to and participation in the project. Your involvement has been vital in the creation of this report and subsequent resources.

## **The Fostering Network**

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity and membership organisation, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

To gather the voices of children we held eight workshops across central Scotland for primary-school aged children. The workshops included movement, play, arts and drama and we used different activities to make sure that everybody who took part was able to be asked their views and experiences in a fun and safe way.

Our disability inclusion co-ordinator went out and about across the country, meeting up with foster carers and children to hear from them what some of the day to day challenges are, and how they have come up with ways of working through some of these challenges.

The final part of the project involved making reports and sharing the information that was gathered through the workshops. We made:

- An activity and discussion book for children and foster carers to talk about fostering and what it means.
- A training course for staff working in fostering services as well as for foster carers about how they can also run workshops using the activities we used at the Walking Tall workshops.
- This report which tells you a bit more about the workshops and also shares some of the messages children came up with.
- A podcast where you can listen to some of the steering group sharing more about the project

## **Background**

There are around 5,200 children in foster care in Scotland who are living with just over 4,000 foster families.

It is really important that the voices of children with care experience and the voices of the sons and daughters of foster carers, are listened to and learned from. Only by listening to these voices can we know if the care that is being provided is right for children.

Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child says that all children and young people have the human right to have opinions and for these opinions to matter. It says that the opinions of children and young people should be considered when people make decisions about things that involve children. It also says children and young people should be given the information they need to make good decisions.

## **Walking Tall workshops**

38 children took part in eight different workshops across Scotland, run by staff from The Fostering Network. Some of the children were in foster care and some were the sons and daughters of foster carers. There were 19 boys and 19 girls who took part in the workshops.

Children were asked a range of questions to help us find out:

- What makes a good foster carer?
- What makes a good wider support network?
- What makes a good fostering household?
- What is important for your self-esteem and identity?

## **What the children told us**

### **What should good foster carers be like?**

You told us that foster carers should be:

- Fun
- Generous
- Smiley
- Happy
- Kind
- Helpful
- Loving
- Caring
- Humble
- Have a friendly face
- Foster carers don't need experience but they have to like children

Some children also shared some things that they felt made a bad foster carer such as, being bossy, shouting, not listening to what children are saying and not being respectful to children.

### **What should good foster carers do?**

You told us that there are lots of things that foster carers do which you think makes them good foster carers, such as:

- Spending time with you
- Doing things that you enjoy with them
- Going on holiday together
- Speaking to you when you feel 'sad' or 'afraid'

One child told us they 'don't like living in foster homes when we don't do anything'.

## **What should good support networks be like?**

You all agreed that people who support you include foster carers, teachers, social workers, health workers, friends, family as well as other adults and groups. You said that support networks should be:

- Protective
- Loving
- Helpful
- Approachable
- Attentive
- Good at listening

Many children felt that you were not afraid to 'talk to adults' and that you had people available to talk to if you need them.

'Children in foster care need love and attention.'

## **My friends and birth family**

You told us that keeping in touch with members of your birth family is really important. One child said that their 'brother and sister and gran [were] important friends, plus weird other granny'.

Keeping in touch with friends helps to offer affection, reassurance and an opportunity to have fun and 'feel happy'.

Some children strongly disagreed with families being separated: 'children should never leave their parents' and 'families should stick together' however, there were also children who knew that sometimes it wasn't possible to live with family due to not being able to be cared for as they should.

Many of the children felt confused and unhappy at not always being told about their family and what was happening with them,

'I know that I have eight brothers and sisters, but I don't know where they are'

'I don't know why I'm not allowed to see my sisters'

'I've moved a lot. Sometimes I don't even know where I'm going to'.

## **We need adults**

You told us that your relationship with foster carers is really important and helps you to feel better about yourself as well as helps you to feel safe. You said,

'a foster caring family is still a family'

'my foster family cares about me'

'your [foster]family is like a shield; they protect you'

'you can't live life alone'

## **What makes a good fostering household?**

At the workshops you came up with lots of things that would make an excellent fostering household. You were encouraged to dream and be ambitious and here is what you said:

## **Space**

Large amounts of space, quiet space and outdoor space is important. Some of you said that having lots of outdoor space might even mean enough room for a swimming pool. Having a lot of space also helps everyone 'to have fun and keep fit' and gives you space to be able to play, which is quite important to you. You also said that having a small and peaceful space for quiet time, particularly for the sons and daughters of foster carers, is important, 'somewhere to go in case you don't want to be around people' 'my house can get very loud, so I need my own space'.

## **My bedroom**

Your bedroom is your own space and some of you also said that you would like to be able to share a bedroom. Having a room big enough to share would mean you could 'have more sleepovers', and also sharing a room means that 'you have someone to talk to'. Sharing with a brother or sister also would help if you felt a bit scared. You also told us that you would like to be able to choose what colours your room are decorated.

## **My belongings**

You said that it is important to have photos of family and friends as well as your own toys. Some of you said that electronic devices and social media are important and sometimes it is unfair if you aren't allowed on the internet because it makes you different from your friends, makes you stand out in school and makes you feel unhappy.

## **My meal times**

You said that 'food in foster homes is really important' and that eating healthily is a good thing, as well as being allowed a treat now and again. You said that it is important to be able to all sit together during meal times, 'it's important to eat together' 'a big table for the whole family to eat meals at' 'I like the smell of sausages when I go in the house – best feeling'.

## **My comfort**

Having a warm house and being told where everything is helps you to feel safe and comfortable. Some children suggested having a name plaque on your bedroom door when you first arrive, along with notes on doors and cupboards around the house to help you to find your way around and know where things are.

## **What is important for my self-esteem and identity?**

### **Being supported to do activities I enjoy**

Being supported to take part in activities that make you happy is important. You also said that it is important to have people reminding you how special you are and what you are good at as well as taking the time to say nice things to you. You said that it is good when adults take the time to ask you about what you like, what you are good at and what you are interested in doing, 'getting to do the things I love makes me happy' 'being stopped from doing the things I love makes me sad'.

## **My emotions**

It isn't always easy to share how you are feeling and the staff at the workshops sometimes had to give a bit of extra support for you to share feelings. Some of you said,  
'I don't like when adults shout, it makes me feel bad',  
'sometimes I get sad and I don't know why'  
'sometimes my carer tells me to calm down but I don't know how to. I get really hot'.

## **What I look like**

Many of you agreed that how you look is an important part of who you are and how you feel and this includes things that you like as well as things that you don't like,  
'it is important what you wear'  
'I hate when people say I'm a big girl'

Some of you found it quite hard to share something that you like about yourself. The staff at the workshops wanted this report to tell foster carers, and other adults caring for children, that they need to take every opportunity to spend time talking and communicating with children, reminding you about your individual strengths and help to make you feel good about yourself.

## **My name**

Names are important to you. Many children said that they did not like it when people said or spelt their name wrong,  
'if people don't know how to say or spell my name it's scary'.

## **Summary**

At the workshops you were able to share what you think and feel. The workshops helped you to feel safe and to open up and share your views while you were having fun and doing activities, learning new skills and making friends. You were also able to meet with children from other fostering families,  
'I can't believe there are other children here in foster care. It's brilliant I'm not the only one.'

You have provided us with lots of great suggestions for what would help children living in fostering families.

## **Your recommendations:**

1. We should be asked what we think makes an excellent fostering household and what makes us feel good about ourselves. Adults in our lives should ask us this regularly and make sure it is written in our care plan.
2. It is good to use fun and imaginative ways when consulting with us. If you want to consult with us formally, then please involve us in the planning process.
3. We should have a say in who is allowed to become a foster carer and what foster carers we live with.
4. We should be given the chance to tell the adults who look after us whether or not they are doing a good job and how they can do better.

5. All of the adults that help care for us must be trained in how to talk to children, how to include children and how to be the best they can be.
6. Foster carers should spend time with us; doing the things we like to do and doing things together. This makes us feel loved and gives us the attention we need.
7. The fostering household should have a space for us to play, a space for us to have quiet time and a space that is just ours.
8. We should be allowed to share a bedroom with our siblings, regardless of age and if we want to share a bed when we are afraid, we should be allowed to do this.
9. We should be allowed to be involved in decorating our own bedrooms because this helps us feel settled and safe.
10. We should be asked if we would like to prepare and eat meals together. This can be a nice experience.
11. When we arrive at a new home, foster carers should tell us everything we need to know about living there.
12. Adults should take the time to get to know us as people; find out who and what is important to us and respect this. Sometimes we will have different views, beliefs, backgrounds, cultures and identities, and these should be celebrated.
13. If adults are moving us to a new foster placement, we need to be told why, where, when, how and who. We need to be fully involved in this process.

## **Our consultation project – Walking Tall**

The Fostering Network in Scotland was awarded funding from the Big Lottery Fund for a two-year project named Walking Tall. The aim of Walking Tall was to consult primary school-aged children on their thoughts about living in fostering households. This included both children in foster care and the sons and daughters of foster carers. A children's participation worker was appointed to co-ordinate the workshop activities and co-produce resources alongside a steering group of volunteers. In addition, a disability inclusion co-ordinator was appointed for six months to engage directly with children with complex disabilities and their foster carers to identify any barriers to participation and ensure that children and young people with disabilities get the opportunity to have their views heard in wider aspects of their care.

The Fostering Network is passionate about the values of inclusion and participation. Through this project we strived to hear the voices of the children who know first-hand what it is like to live in a fostering household and who have views on how this experience might be enhanced. These views were then used to create resources which aim to support those who foster, improve opportunities for children living in fostering households and provide guidance to fostering services from a child's perspective.

To gather the voices of children we designed and delivered eight consultation workshops, held across central Scotland and aimed at primary-school aged children. The workshops included movement,

play, arts and drama and the use of these creative consultation methods enabled the participants to be consulted on their views and experiences while increasing self-esteem and resilience, all within a fun and safe environment.

Our disability inclusion co-ordinator met face to face with foster carers and children to hear directly from them the challenges they experience day to day, and how they have successfully addressed some of these challenges.

The final stage of the project involved creating and distributing resources based on the information that was gathered through the workshops. These included:

- this report, summarizing the workshops and containing recommendations identified by the children
- a poster highlighting what the children told us along with the children want.
- a child-friendly booklet to support foster carers to engage with children living in fostering households in a consultative and therapeutic way
- a report capturing the findings from engaging with children with disabilities.
- a podcast where we heard from some of the steering group members about what the project meant to them.
- a training course aimed at fostering service staff and foster carers on how to recreate the consultation activities used in the Walking Tall workshops

These resources were informed by our consultation with primary school-aged children living in fostering households, along with the project's steering group which consisted of children in foster care, the sons and daughters of foster carers, foster carers and fostering service staff from across Scotland. The youngest member of the group was aged five. The steering group met quarterly to help ensure that the project met its aims and objectives while maintaining a participatory approach. One member noted of their children involved, 'the steering group is the only thing they will miss gymnastics for!'

## **Background**

Scotland is home to around three-quarters of all children being looked after away from home and family. It is essential that the voices of care experienced children and young people, as well as those of the sons and daughters of foster carers, are listened to and learned from. Only by listening to these voices can we ensure that we are making the most of the strengths and opportunities of children living in fostering households and know if the care that is being provided is meeting the needs of the child.

Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child states that children, regardless of age, should have the right to express their opinions and that those opinions should be considered in decision making processes about their daily lives. Children should also be given the information they need to make good decisions and they have the right to complain and refrain from giving an opinion, if



they choose<sup>1</sup>. This sentiment is echoed in the Scottish Government's 'Policy Update: Delivering the Getting it Right for Every Child' report from July 2017, which states that: 'children, young people and parents must be confident that practitioners will work in partnership with them and with others, so that no aspects of wellbeing are overlooked, strengths and assets are recognised, and potentially significant problems are identified and dealt with through early support.'<sup>2</sup>

Consultation is one tool that can be used within a participation model of working alongside children to hear the voice of children. Consulting children involves genuinely seeking out, listening to and acting upon their views, experiences, opinions and suggestions. There are numerous things to consider when consulting with children, such as preferred learning style, environment, circumstances, age, ability and communication needs. The same things should also be considered when consulting with adults, however it is essential to recognise the importance of using new and innovative approaches to consulting children because it embraces them just as they are – children being children, not children learning to be adults. Using interactive child-friendly approaches also encourages and sustains engagement, while creating a fun and creative environment. There is no single correct way of consulting or involving children because the method used will very much depend on what the anticipated outputs are, how long it will last and how much the participants want to be consulted or involved.

## Walking Tall workshops

The Fostering Network engaged with 38 primary school-aged children living in fostering households in Scotland (both children living in foster care and the sons and daughters of foster carers). We only involved children who had lived in their fostering household for at least six months. Eight consultation workshops were held across central Scotland, with an average of 13 children attending each workshop. Each workshop lasted between two and four hours and were delivered as part of a series, with each participant attending between two and four workshops. Each workshop was supported by experienced staff from The Fostering Network. While many children were dropped off and collected by carers, foster carers were welcome to remain in the vicinity, and a comfortable space was provided to enable this. These factors promoted the development of relationships between all group members, including facilitators to help ensure that the consultation was as meaningful and authentic as possible.

We engaged with an equal mix of female and male children and included children who lived with a range of physical and learning disabilities. They children responded in different ways, preferred differing learning styles and identified with a range of communication and literacy challenges. We used a number of interactive and creative consultation methods, using art, play, drama and movement.

The qualitative data was gathered through conversation with individuals and with groups, as well as feedback recorded by the children and facilitators using a 'walking tall wall'.

The children were advised that the feedback would be completely confidential, and their consent was obtained to allow their information to be included in the consultation.

Total number of participants consulted in the workshops	38
Number of female participants	19

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cypcs.org.uk/rights/uncrcarticles/article-12>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00529614.pdf>

Number of male participants	19
Number of non-binary participants	0
Participants aged 5-7 years	4
Participants aged 8-10 years	25
Participants aged 11-13 years	9
Participants living with a diagnosed learning disability	3
Participants living with learning difficulties	3
Participants living with literacy difficulties	2
Participants living with PICA	1
Participants living with diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	2
Participants living with suspected (undiagnosed) ASD	1
Participants living with diagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)	2
Participants living with diagnosed anxiety	2
Participants living with communication/speech difficulties	4

## Other Walking Tall materials

### Walking Tall – Making things in the fostering home, exploring life together

This resource contains activities designed for children to complete along with an adult. These activities simply offer fun and innovative methods of engaging with and communicating with children and have been informed by individuals who have foster care experience. With no right or wrong answers, the resource aims to encourage open and honest discussion between the adult and the child to promote and encourage self-esteem and resilience. The activities are aimed at enhancing the foster care experience for children in foster care, the sons and daughters of foster carers, foster carers and fostering service staff. Children can receive a certificate for completing the activities. Visit [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/walking-tall](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/walking-tall) for more information.

### Walking Tall – Disability inclusion work

While consulting with children through the workshops it became apparent we were not capturing the voice of children and young people with more complex disabilities, those who cannot easily voice their views. This led us to ask: If we were not doing this was the voice of these children being captured at all in the foster care system? A disability inclusion co-ordinator was appointed for six months to engage directly with children with complex disabilities and their foster carers to ensure that the views of children with disabilities were heard and any barriers to participation were identified.

We set out with the aims of:

- discovering if the voice of children and young people with complex disabilities was being heard
- exploring how foster carers are supported to look after children with complex disabilities
- producing some guidance to support foster carers working with children with complex disabilities.

The findings from this, along with sources of further information can be found in the report, Walking Tall – Disability inclusion work. Visit [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/walking-tall](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/projects-and-programmes/walking-tall) to learn more.

## **Training workshop**

The Fostering Network's Walking Tall training workshop aims to critically explore this area further and how the learning can aid individual fostering families and fostering services. The course will include tools for consulting with children.

## **Walking Tall podcast**

The Fostering Network's All About Fostering podcasts explore a variety of issues relating to issues. The steering group members shared more about what the project meant to them and can be heard [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/podcasts](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/podcasts)

To access any of the above resources please contact:

[thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

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