

Building capacity for male foster carers: the caring roles, views and experiences of male foster carers

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- Background: why the research was conducted
- Research aims and method
- Key findings:
 - male foster carers' roles and responsibilities
 - men's contribution to fostering
 - barriers and facilitators for male foster carers
- Messages for policy and practice

Background to the research

- Relatively little research around male foster care in the UK
- Increasing numbers of looked after children
 - **75, 420 in England as of March 2018, a 4% increase on 2017 and 9% increase since 2014**
- Changing profile of those in care: increasing proportion of older children, males, those with more complex/acute needs and history of multiple placement breakdowns

- Recruitment and retention of foster carers, declining capacity?
 - **Rising number in foster care: 55, 200 in 2018, up from 50, 880 in 2014 (8% increase)**
 - **Falling number of approved fostering households**
 - **2017 data - Estimated 10% of fostering households de-registered**
 - **Estimated shortfall of 6000 fostering households in UK**
- Currently, foster care largely tailored to/driven by female oriented ideas of care?

Research aims

- To find out about the caring roles and responsibilities undertaken by male foster carers in different household contexts
- Perspectives on the particular contribution of male foster carers
- The views and experiences of men who foster

Method

- Online survey
- Mix of quantitative and open questions
- A total of 77 responses
- Majority of men were in couple households, 8 single male carers
- All but one of the respondents were White British

Caring roles and responsibilities

- Physical care giving (bathing, changing, assisting with toilet, dressing child)
- Looking after child when they are sick
- Cooking /preparing food for child
- Feeding/assisting child in their eating
- Shopping for/with child for non-food items e.g. clothes
- Leisure activities/playing with child at home or outside the home e.g. trips, park
- Reading with/to child
- Helping child with homework
- Teaching e.g. social skills, personal care, life skills
- Arranging appointments for the child e.g. doctor, dentist, social worker
- Transporting e.g. taking to school, taking to friends' house
- Discipline and monitoring; Moral guidance
- Emotional support/responsiveness e.g. praise, encouragement, comforting
- Communicating e.g. talking together, sharing conversation

Caring roles and responsibilities

	% of male respondents
Equally split	52%
Man is main carer (couple household)	11%
Woman is main carer (couple household)	20%
Single male carer	17%

- Significant equality in caring roles and responsibilities
- Men reported taking the lead in many of the different types of roles and responsibilities
- Key roles for men included transporting, leisure/play and helping with homework
- A smaller percentage of men who reported little or no involvement in physical care giving than perhaps might be expected? (22%)
- A lot of roles were **equally shared**, some of which might be considered to be 'traditionally female' e.g. looking after child when sick (40%), teaching social/personal/life skills (50%), emotional support/responsiveness (46%), talking, communicating, sharing conversation (45%)

Particular contribution of male foster carers

- Positive father figure/Male role modelling

"I feel a huge responsibility to provide a positive male role model to the young person we look after. So much of the life that young people in the care system experience is around males who are violent and have significant issues related with drugs and alcohol misuse. Often the views of women and of relationships is very negative so I feel that it is important to show another side of the story in relation to men in a caring role".

"I feel comfortable carrying out most task related to my role as a foster carer, I feel my main strength is focused around the 'father figure', I like to think of myself as a calm, considered and caring. This I believe can be a great influence on children who have experienced very poor male role models in their lives".

- Discipline

“In our situation I feel the young man who we take care of needs that constant black and white, right and wrong. It seems to be when I get involved he pushes the boundaries so far you cant see the boundary any longer but with my husband he won’t push as far”.

- Fostering should reflect society/all aspects of life

“Fostering must reflect society and as such there is a need to provide good role models from all aspects of life, including men. In many cases men have been absent from a child's life or have significantly contributed to the reasons why children are in care”.

- Men bringing a different perspective, alternative approach to care

“I think every child needs a good role model. Men give a different perspective to life styles and skills”.

- Men just as able to fulfil all roles and responsibilities therefore they don't necessarily have a 'particular/different' contribution

“I don't really see gender as an issue. I feel I can make the same contribution as a woman”.

Barriers/key issues

- Financial constraints: fees and allowances; lack of clarity, information, consistency over tax breaks

	Fees/allowances cover full costs of fostering	Fees/allowances do not cover full costs of fostering
Male in couple household	53%	46%
Single male carer	75%	25%
All male respondents	56%	44%

- Societal stigma and gendered stereotypes around men's care and particularly caring for other people's children

“There's the perception this is 'women' work. In the modern climate, there is sadly, a perception that men's motives are suspect. As a society we need to own these perceptions & strive to overcome them”.

“Assumption that women are natural carers. Fostering is definitely a woman's world”.

“Men's own fears about how they will be viewed by others for wanting to do this”.

- Fear/risk of allegations

“Very wary of being involved with females. Although I have a daughter and several granddaughters, all of which I have been very involved with. I am conscious of my own vulnerability”.

“When a young child would like a playful romp, you feel cautious about engaging in the way you would with your own child, and hold back from what would otherwise be a fun time together that would help build a normal attachment. You are specifically told not to tickle, and this instruction again limits the fun of a more normal family experience”.

- Attitude of some social service (and other) professionals

“A lot of the professionals sometimes treat me a little different in meetings and ask or talk more to my wife, then she will correct them and say my husband is the main carer, you can get some surprised reactions from them”.

“Completely misunderstood and unsupported by social services who happen to be 99% female workers”.

- Foster carer recruitment, events and training very female focussed/dominated

“attending meetings and gatherings are normally female dominated, which is not a problem for myself, but may put some male carers off”.

Facilitators

- Previous experience of caring for children/young people
- Key transitions/turning points in life or employment

"This has been an interesting change for us in our 50's, it's a complete role reversal for us. My wife was a 'stay at home' mum...There are many men who've taken early retirement or been made redundant who could provide this type of care very easily as they have good life skills. Perhaps greater efforts could be made to recruit more men from this category".

- Increasing ‘professionalization’
- Flexible working/child friendly policies facilitating men’s involvement in caring when partner is the primary carer

- Peer support, male foster carer forums/groups

"Making connections with other carers is vital, at coffee groups, training, holiday activities and building trust and vulnerability with them, getting and giving support as needed"

"Our local authority runs a men’s network group which meets every two months. This is particularly helpful as the three support groups that are age related are so dominated by women that few men attend more than once, as they feel so out of place".

- Tailored training for male carers and specialist training courses

"Social Pedagogy has been profoundly beneficial for me in my practice, marriage and for myself privately".

"Social Pedagogy has taken my ability as a person and a carer to a new level. It has given me the confidence to try lots of new stuff with the kids and understand them a lot more".

Messages for policy and practice

- Need greater recognition of the important role that men have to play in foster care
- Challenge the gendered stereotypes, stigma around men as carers

“Challenge the stigma the media has created that males are predators - promote positive outcomes around male carers - challenge ideas around male carers”

- Tailored/targeted recruitment, training and support for male foster carers

- Treating male foster carers, and those looking to become foster carers, as equally capable and with equal respect to women
- More robust financial support and ‘conditions’
- More work to address the key issue of risk/allegations is needed

“Until men can feel either better protected or supported, in my opinion it will be very difficult to encourage more men willing to put themselves in what is potentially a position of risk”.

- Need a better understanding of the reasons why those who begin the fostering approval process drop out
- The perspectives, experiences and support needs of ethnic minority foster carers and male foster carers in different household configurations e.g. same-sex couples

Thank you

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