

Men who care

experiences and reflections
from male foster carers



the fostering network
the voice of foster care



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from male foster carers

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www.fostering.net

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How to use this book

This book is designed to be an aid to discussion of the issues around being a male foster carer. It can be used:

- within a support group or foster care association
- in training sessions, particularly for men who foster
- in the foster home to prompt discussions within the foster family and between couples that foster
- in education and training settings to develop the knowledge and understanding of health and social care professionals.

There is a brief introduction to each story to set the scene regarding the key issues, and two or three questions following each story to prompt discussion.

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Introduction

reflections from the workshop facilitators

It was a cold February morning in 2010 when we arrived for the start of day one of our storytelling workshop with male foster carers. This event was part of a collaboration between the University of Glamorgan's StoryWorks team and the Fostering Network, with the aim of encouraging a group of men to share their experiences of fostering. As the facilitators of the workshop, we were both a little apprehensive. Would anyone turn up? Would they have anything to say? This was a first for us and we had no idea what to expect.

But turn up they certainly did – and some had set off at the crack of dawn just to get there. Suddenly we had 12 male foster carers in the room; 150 years of combined fostering experience and over 900 children cared for. And the men had so much to say, we hardly needed to be there. All the careful preparation we had done to break the ice and get the men talking was suddenly redundant. This was clearly a unique experience for them, and one that had been a long time coming for many. Stories tumbled out and shared experiences were acknowledged with a range of emotions that reflected the personal journey each man had been on as a foster carer. Our job was easy; we simply needed to create a safe space for the stories to emerge and for the men to find their voices.

Sadly, there is insufficient space in this book to do justice to the richness of the experiences that we were party to over the next two days. Suffice to say that we both left feeling moved and much wiser about fostering from a male perspective. But, perhaps most importantly, we left convinced of the need for men who care to be able to share their stories with each other and with the wider world.

We both consider ourselves privileged to have been part of the process to enable the men to find the stories they wanted to tell. Some of those stories are reproduced in this book, in the men's own words, with minimal changes (including names) to protect confidentiality.

We hope that you will find these stories as inspirational and thought provoking as we did.

Karen Lewis

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Steve Killick

StoryWorks Associate

For more information about StoryWorks, please visit www.storyworksglam.co.uk

Being a man who cares an introduction from Alan Torry



The role of a foster carer can be both extremely rewarding and at the same time emotionally strenuous. Being a male foster carer has, arguably, even more challenges – there are those who wonder why any man would want to work with children, those who don't understand what a wonderful role model a male foster carer can be and those who find it difficult to believe that men really can be in touch with their own emotions, let alone be capable of helping a child to deal with theirs.

As foster carers we learn so much from the children and young people we care for – about their lives, their hopes, their fears and the (sometimes) terrible circumstances that led to them being taken into care in the first place. Usually, the youngsters learn to trust their foster carers before they offload their feelings and experiences, but when they do you know you are getting on to what can sometimes be a quite scary emotional rollercoaster.

Our first priority is, of course, helping the child, but even when they are getting the support they need it does not end for the foster carer. We have to learn to live with their stories, much as we might prefer not to, so we have to develop our own strategies for coping with the secrets to which we've become privy. We can't talk to a pal at the pub or pour out our feelings to a relative. Apart from the obvious confidential nature of the knowledge, no one else can really appreciate where the foster carer is coming from, our feelings, the frustrations, the stresses, the anger and the terrible sadness that many disclosures bring.

And even when you get the chance to share these emotions with other foster carers, it doesn't come easy to us all. Do men find it harder to express their feelings than women? I don't know the answer to that, but what I do know is that not all of us attending the storytelling workshop had ever been as open in demonstrating our deeper feelings before, and that most of us weren't used to expressing our emotions or crying, especially in public. But over those two days many of us did cry. Some of us wept at what we were saying, at the memories we pulled out into the open, and some of us cried when we heard the stories that our fellow foster carers were sharing with us.

I think that the cathartic process of telling each other the stories and drawing so much from our own feelings caused us to form a bond of mutual respect and understanding, very like a 'band of brothers' as someone said on the last day. One thing that sums up the experience for me was when, on day two, one of our group (a quiet and undemonstrative chap) announced in a matter of fact way that he'd been awarded the MBE for services to foster care. He felt moved to say that he now wanted to share his MBE with us 'because', he said, 'we've all shared so much we really should share this. It's for all of us boys, all of us'.

I am extremely proud of being a foster carer and knowing that I have been a positive male role model for the children I have cared for, maybe the first they had ever known. The storytelling workshop helped me find my voice, to express myself and to take away a renewed desire to improve understanding of why men like us want to foster, of what a great job we do, and what help we need to be able to do this. This book will, I hope, be a step in the right direction on all three counts.

*Alan Torry,
Trustee, the Fostering Network*

Making a difference

the role of the foster carer



Being a foster carer brings a unique combination of the personal and the professional. Foster carers are child care professionals, but their position is unique in that they are caring for a child or young person 24 hours a day, seven days a week in their own home. They are not 'replacing' the child's parent(s) but they will inevitably build deep relationships with children they care for.

Harry's story

In the past few years my wife and I have fostered seven children, including two brothers who have been with us from the beginning. They are now aged 14 and 15 – one cheeky and capable, one troubled with behavioural difficulties but a disarming smile.

There have been traumatic times when I question why I am fostering at all, interspersed with moments of warmth, humour and sheer, unadulterated pleasure.

There came a time when, despite our best efforts, I believed that we were failing as foster carers because I couldn't see the improvement in behaviour, which should have been evident from the boys. The 'cheeky' one was still cheeky but loveable and socially adept. The 'troubled' one was still stealing and lying profusely.

Each time I thought we'd made progress, our trust in them would be damaged. I asked myself again and again: 'Are we

making a difference? Why are we not succeeding? Why am I still doing this?'

Then one lovely summer's day we took the boys to the local carnival where they won a goldfish in a plastic bag. As we sat on the harbour wall, enjoying the summer sun, the 'cheeky' one said: 'My fish is drowning'. I laughed and said: 'Don't be daft. It's a fish. It lives in water.' He said: 'No – I mean it can't get air in this plastic bag.'

I told him to ask our friends who owned a guesthouse directly behind where we were sitting if they'd lend them a rigid plastic container. The two boys left and came back some minutes later with the fish now safely inside a recycled ice-cream tub, with holes punched in the lid. They said our friends had given them the box but had asked if I would go into the house to see them.

Confused, I went into the guesthouse with the two boys. Sitting at a large dining table with my friends, the owners, were four women who had obviously been crying. 'Are you the foster carer for these two boys?' one said. I said that I was, wondering what was coming next. She said: 'We thought we recognised the boys' faces as we are all teachers at the school they came from before going into care, and we asked to see you because we wanted to tell you how amazed we are at how changed they are. They are such smart, polite and well-mannered young men and we cannot believe that they are the same boys we taught in school. We want to congratulate you and your wife and thank you with all our hearts for what you have done for them. You must be very proud.'

The women hugged me and I felt tearful myself as I realised how proud we actually were of these two boys and the efforts they had each made to make this moment possible.

I may not be their father, but they are my sons – and I have told them so.

Questions for discussion

- Should a foster carer think of themselves as a 'mother' or 'father' to a child in their care?
- Is it important that foster carers are now called 'foster carers' as opposed to 'foster parents' ?
- Can you have a 'foster family' without having a 'foster parent'?
- What does it mean to be a 'professional parent'?

Why do we do it?

men who foster



Being a male foster carer means sometimes having to think carefully about the role you play. Women are traditionally seen as natural care-givers, but in some circles a man who devotes his life to caring for children can be treated with suspicion.

Bill's story

Where do I start? If you are reading this you must have had some thoughts about looked-after children. Whether you work with or care for them, let me tell you that they are time consuming, heart wrenching, soul destroying... but most of all, they give you a rewarding and uplifting experience that will be a part of you for the rest of your life.

People think that being a foster carer is an easy ride – *'It's just like looking after your own children, and it pays really well.'* This is so far from the truth. No amount of money can pay or prepare you for the upset, frustration, pain and anger that you often go through. You're on call 24 hours a day, as you are with your own children – but with your own children you don't have to deal with a child's 'real' family or social services who, in my experience, often help and support but can also make things very difficult. Social workers get the opportunity to leave the situation behind and go home after work, but our

work is always there: when we are awake, asleep, and even when on holidays trying to relax.

As a male foster carer the odds are stacked against you. You are afraid to hug a young girl who is upset for fear of being called an abuser, and you can't fool around, play and tickle, like you do with your own children. The stigma of being a male foster carer runs deep.

Instead of being a provider and protector you are often portrayed as someone to fear, to be wary of, even the abuser, but more commonly you are just not considered a valid part of the care team who look after the children. When the social worker phones and asks to speak to my wife I ask myself: 'Who am I? Why not talk to me?'

So back to the question: *Why do we do this?* We do it because we care. We have the need to nurture, to support, to protect, to help, to listen and to put up with most things that are thrown at us – including shoes and other missiles that are to hand.

Foster care spans the extremes: it ranges from a child that for the first six months of her stay refused to talk to me, or even sit in the same room alone with me, to the same girl (years later) asking me to give her away on her wedding day: 'as you're like a dad to me, at least the only one I have ever known.'

To see children grow and develop into young adolescents and start the next phase of the journey in their lives, whether it be a bright new future or back to the rat race they came from: that's why we do it.

'Why do we do this? We do it because we care.'

Questions for discussion

- What is the 'stigma' of being a male foster carer that is referred to here?
- Is this stigma justified? Where might it come from?
- What can male foster carers do to challenge this stigma?

Highs and lows

the role of the male foster carer



Every foster carer has unique skills, experiences and abilities that they bring to fostering, regardless of gender. However, sometimes a male foster carer will need to think about the role he plays in caring for children, particularly those that have had a negative experience with men in the past.

Gary's story

It was 11.30am on a spring morning when we received a phone call from social services to ask if we would consider taking two brothers. One was four and the other was six. The younger of the two would be coming straight from hospital. The social worker told us that he had been very badly physically and sexually abused. We didn't think twice – we just said yes straight away.

The children arrived with the social worker and aid worker at 4pm. The social worker fully expected to stay for a few hours to give the children a bit of security until they felt a little more settled in our company. After 45 minutes it was almost as if the children had been with us forever.

We had decided that over the first few days I would take a bit of a back seat with regard to their care. We made this decision because the children were abused by a man and we didn't want them to feel scared of me. Over the next few days we found out what we had taken on. The children were what

can only be described as 'feral'. They had no boundaries and wanted to come and go as they pleased. The eldest found it very difficult to cope with me telling them what they could and couldn't do and where they could go and constantly told me I had no right to tell his little brother what he could do.

In the first few weeks we took the children on holiday to the seaside. While we were there the younger child had an extremely frightening nightmare. It took him a long time to calm down, as he was crying uncontrollably and he kept repeating the phrase 'the monster in mummy's bed'. When he had calmed down he made some disclosures about his treatment while at home and we, of course, had to report this to social services.

The information was passed on to the police, the children were then interviewed by a policewoman and, as a result, the case was taken to court. The eldest child was a true star, giving evidence about the things he had been a witness to. This was a difficult time for all involved, us included, as we also had to give statements and evidence in court. As a result of this the offending parties were convicted.

We are now a year on and the two boys are very different children to the ones that turned up on our doorstep. They were poorly educated, the eldest struggling in his 'special' class for children with severe emotional and social needs. He is now in the top band at school in Maths and English and he is holding his own in all other subjects. He was also afraid of water when he came but he is now in the school swimming team. The youngest is a much more confident child and he is also doing really well in school.

It has been a bumpy ride, with some highs and a lot of lows, and the ride is not over yet as the children are waiting for therapy to start. We do not know what this therapy will throw up. It could mean more disclosures from the children and more court appearances, but I am sure that if we help and support each other we will come through the other side.

Questions for discussion

- Was it the right thing for the male carer to 'take a back seat' as the children had been abused by a man?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?
- What impact might hearing of possible abuse have on foster carers?

The shopping trip

a story
of success



From time to time, we all need some praise. When you're a foster carer, this can sometimes feel hard to come by. This is a story about how a feeling of achievement can come from the most unexpected of places.

Adam's story

It was the regular family shopping trip to the supermarket and we had our usual bit of fun as we packed the groceries. Then my wife left me to pay and she took the kids to get a coffee and use the toilet before the trip home.

The young woman who had served us turned to me and asked, in a searching type of way:

'Are they your grandchildren?'

'No,' I answered, 'they just live with us.'

'Are they from the next village?'

'Yes.'

Then she became very emotional. I was a bit shocked at this, but she quickly pulled herself together, apologised and went on to tell me that she used to be their neighbour when they

lived at home, aged six and seven. She was tearful as she told me how she would take them into her house in the mornings and give them a wash and breakfast before they went to school, as they had to get themselves off to school because their parents did not get out of bed until the afternoon.

She then went on to explain that the reason for her emotional state was that she was so pleased to see them looking so well and 'normal'. She went on to recall that she knew what they had gone through in their short lives and remembered them being taken into care and had feared the worst for their future.

Now she had met them again, a few years later, she was so happy and content to see how they had developed and she felt so pleased. I can still recall her closing words: 'I never thought I would see them again and, if I did, I certainly didn't expect to see them looking so happy and well.'

This is the buzz that we get out of being foster carers.

Questions for discussion

- If you are a foster carer, has anything similar ever happened to you?
- How do foster carers know when they are doing a good job?
- What could success mean to a foster carer?

Hand to mouth

understanding behaviour



Dealing with challenging behaviour is part of being a foster carer. But different people can find different types of behaviour more, or less, challenging – and some behaviour will be downright baffling. A foster carer will need to look beyond the behaviour to understand where it comes from.

Owen's story

We took on two little ones, aged five to six years old, and, after the 'settling in period', they appeared to have few major problems, except with eating. No matter how much food they had, or how regularly it came, they would wake up during the night and forage for food in the house: cupboard, fridge, bins, any place they thought more food could be found. Bedroom locks were out of the question as locking internal doors posed a safety issue in the case of a fire.

We tried giving them a supper before their bedtime: porridge or rice pudding to fill them up. But to no avail – they still went walkabout in the night.

We discussed this at length with the relevant bodies and, of course, both children, but we got nowhere. Then one night, when I was due to go on night shift, an idea came to me as I was in the kitchen making the sandwiches for my break. I called my wife and we discussed it. The suggestion was that we give the little ones sandwiches to take to bed. So, that night we prepared the children for bed and gave them each

a packet of sandwiches. They were puzzled, but fell in with the 'game' happily.

Well, for the first week we still had 'night wanderers' because they ate the sandwiches straight away when they went to bed. By the end of the second week, we were getting some sandwiches back, although occasionally they were stuck to some part of their body where they had fallen asleep.

After about a month there were no more walkabouts and the sandwich boxes were returned unused. The children had finally come to trust that food was not to be foraged for but would come on time, every time. These little ones had lived a literally hand to mouth existence at home and we had regained their trust and confidence. They left for a family placement shortly after that and took their boxes with them. I hope they never needed them in the same way ever again.

Questions for discussion

- What experiences may have led these children to raid the fridge at night?
- Why did giving them sandwiches work, when discussing the issue with the children didn't?
- Why is it so important to understand the reasons behind a child's behaviour?

Presumptions and assumptions

caring for a
child with
special needs



Many children in foster care will have some form of disability or particular needs. Conditions such as autism and ADHD are also not uncommon. This can lead to some interesting conversations for foster carers.

Andy's story

This is a snippet of a conversation at our dinner table one teatime with one of our fostered children, John. He was aged 13 at the time, with global delay and autism.

John: My teacher hit me in the face with a football today.

Me: Was it an accident John?

John: I don't think so; he did it deliberately.

Me: What did you do John?

John: Nothing, I had to stand there!

Me: Was there anyone else there to see this?

John: Yes, my friends.

Me: What did they do?

John: They all laughed.

Me: Are you sure it wasn't an accident or a mistake?
Because I can't see a teacher doing that on purpose, can you?

John: No, he did kick the ball so hard and it hit me in the face.

Me: Well John, this is a serious thing, are you sure about it? Because if you are we have to report it and people must investigate it thoroughly.

John: Yes it is the truth and I want something done about it.

Me: OK John, let's go through it once more just to make sure.

John: I was standing there and Mr Smith ran up and kicked the ball straight at me. I put my hands up but I was not fast enough, and the ball went through and hit me in the side of my face.

Me: Did the teacher say anything after he had kicked the ball at you?

John: Yes, he said 'what a shot!'.

Me: John, were you playing football?

John: Yes.

Me: What position did you play, John?

John: Goalie.

Me: Was Mr Smith taking a penalty?

John: Yes.

At this point we all continued eating our dinner, and my wife and I were relieved that John's tale of woe was simply his literal understanding of a game of football. However, this was to be the first of many disclosures from John during his time with us – some amusing, some painfully sad and some downright heartbreaking. We still foster this boy today and he continues to surprise us.

'We still foster this boy today and he continues to surprise us.'

Questions for discussion

- Why is it so important not to make assumptions?
- What are the things a foster carer needs to think about when fostering a child with autism?
- What should the foster carer have done if John's experience had turned out to be something more serious?

A poem

These short verses are extracts from a longer poem, which one of the men, Danny, wrote as a result of the storytelling workshop.

New school to start
Not alone in the yard
The secrets they'll keep
From friends they will meet.

There have been times
When I think I have lost it
But you must remember
'The Skills to Foster'.

I pause for a while
And still I smile
I've seen some tears
In the past four years.

A year is a thought
A year in the making
I'm so proud that
It's the path I've taken.

I know I brought joy
To girl and boy
And it really feels good
Doing the things we should.

'I'm so proud that it's the path I've taken.'



When a fostered child dies

dealing with grief



Foster carers are used to the fact that children will move on from their care: some will go back to their own family; some will move on to adoption or a long-term foster placement; some will move on to live independently. But sadly, on occasion, there are other reasons for a placement ending.

Shaun's story

In the early 1980s we were asked, out of the blue, if we could care for a baby that had been born with severe cerebral palsy. We obviously said we would try and do our best for her. After two weeks or so of visiting her and learning how best to handle and care for her, she came home with us.

Before leaving the hospital we were advised that she had a limited life span; maybe less than twelve months and, if so, could we cope? The baby was quadriplegic, had little or no sight and very little hearing. Her care involved numerous clinic visits and extensive home physiotherapy and speech therapy to help just to be able to feed her. Eventually she had to have all her food and drink from a spoon because she lost the ability to suckle.

We all became very fond of and attached to this little girl, including our youngest daughter who still lived at home with us. The rest of our family, including extended family members, were also very fond of her.

In the mid 1980s she developed what we thought was a cold. This was just before Easter time. However, on a Saturday morning my wife rang me at work and wanted me home as quickly as possible. She was nursing the baby, who was having difficulty breathing. We were waiting for a doctor to arrive. My wife then told me that the baby had stopped breathing. She had passed away while being nursed by my wife, who absolutely loved her.

After the doctor, police, social worker and funeral director had left came the repercussions. Out of the numbness and hurt and feelings of helplessness were the questions – was it something we had or had not done? Should we have been aware in the previous days that she was struggling to survive? And these thoughts and questions had to be resolved, even though we were deeply grieving for this little girl. Eventually we were advised that she had developed double pneumonia and that nothing could have been done for her. This did not diminish the grief we felt, even though we were told that she had lived 18 months longer than expected. The grieving for her took a long time to subside and no other placement arrived for over six months.

Since this time there have been other special needs babies among our many placements, but the first little one who passed away still brings a tear to our eyes. And this is after 25 years. With every placement since, we have been extra vigilant with the care and health of each one, and we continue to feel privileged to be asked to look after and care for someone else's child.

‘...we continue to feel privileged to be asked to look after and care for someone else's child.’

Questions for discussion

- Is this depth of attachment and the lasting impact of grief surprising to hear of in a foster carer? Why?
- Is managing strong and painful feelings part of the 'job' of a foster carer?
- What support do foster carers need in situations such as this?

Caring for disabled children

safer caring issues



All foster carers need to think about safer caring issues. However, for male foster carers this can be a particularly challenging aspect of fostering. How can you balance the need to protect yourself alongside the need to provide care to those you foster?

James's story

The role of a foster carer is not an easy one for anyone, but it is probably even more difficult for a man. Men have got a bad press. As foster carers we are told to 'safeguard' against possible allegations – not to get too physical and not to be alone in the same room as girls we are fostering. This works to minimise the risks of allegations, but it's not always possible when working with disabled children.

The child we had placed in our family had severe autism. He came with little, if any, life skills and only ate chips and pasties and drank milk. He could not speak and was physically aggressive. The first week was the hardest with him. He smeared his faeces everywhere in his bedroom and drank 16 pints of milk over the weekend. We informed the social worker that we could not afford a cow so this would have to change.

He threw his food at us if it was unrecognised and scratched and bit for attention. Toileting meant he either had to be

helped or he urinated all over the bathroom. His teeth, hair and body would not be washed unless we did it.

This was not playing by the 'safeguarding' rules, but we had little choice if he was to survive. Safer care training did not help much, either. We were told again that what we were doing was 'not safe', and the emphasis was stronger in connection with me as a man. To address this as far as possible I had a list written up of the needs and responsibilities that I had to undertake to care for him safely. I then had this signed by my supporting social worker and the boy's social worker. This would, at least, help our case if anything went wrong.

He has been with us now for seven years and we have taught him to dress, wash and eat with a knife and fork. He can be taken to a restaurant without any embarrassment to anyone. He can communicate with sign and a picture system and is a lot happier in himself. He can toilet himself, other than the odd need for a final wipe. He also needs help only with washing his hair and brushing his teeth.

Fostering is a challenge and it can be risky. However, seeing this child grow in confidence and life skills is worth every hour we've spent. Every up and down we've had has been well worth the time and effort and I would recommend the challenge to anyone who feels up to it. Fostering does make the difference.

'Every up and down we've had has been well worth the time and effort and I would recommend the challenge to anyone...'

Questions for discussion

- What does 'safer caring' mean for male foster carers?
- What would be good guidelines for helping keep care safer for both children and foster carers, especially regarding touch?
- What are some of the stresses in caring for a child with severe disabilities?

Still grieving

dealing with
children
moving on



Fostering will not usually involve a child becoming a permanent part of your family; being a foster carer is about offering a warm and nurturing home for as long as it is needed. But when a child has become a significant part of your life and family, it can be difficult to say goodbye.

Tom's story

My children were grown, the house was large, my job seemed to make no difference to people's lives and we had wanted more children. We decided to foster.

Initially, we did respite caring and thoroughly enjoyed it. We were then offered two young sisters on a long-term basis.

We were their fourth home in seven weeks, with the immediately previous carers giving up after just two weeks. That should have forewarned us. These were very damaged, beautiful little girls.

They didn't really understand how men should behave and how a husband and wife interact. The younger child was very wary of all males and the older child was insufficiently cautious and somewhat tactile. On the very rare occasions that my wife and I had sharp words, they would ask: 'Are you breaking up?'.
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Their behaviour was shocking. At the beginning we were assaulted about three times a day. We had to lock bedrooms because anything and everything would be stolen. We would find faeces in unexpected places. We were spat at in the face. We had two hour screaming tantrums.

So why did we continue? Well, it wasn't their fault. They were hurt, vulnerable, frightened little girls.

For months, at night they would not settle unless I slept on the landing between their two bedrooms with the doors open. They would wet the beds.

Gradually they improved. I became a trusted male and we started to have fun together. They became confident cycling and swimming and they shared my love of wildlife, camping, boating and the outdoors.

However, there were still enormous behavioural problems and the violence towards us and others didn't totally stop. The older child was eventually permanently excluded from school for violence towards teachers.

It could also be very embarrassing when the children 'kicked off' in public: on one occasion, in a cathedral, the younger sister 'kicked off' because an age restriction prevented her from going up the tower. She had a powerful voice, the acoustics were great and the religious service ground to a halt. The clergy, the tourists and the congregation all seemed to be speechless and watching. I tucked her under my arms and headed rapidly for the door, with the sound of: 'LET GO OF ME! PUT ME DOWN! YOU'RE NOT MY DADDY!' reverberating through the cathedral. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

'Gradually they improved... I became a trusted male and we started to have fun together.'

Two sets of respite carers refused to have them again.

Despite the improvements in the girls' behaviour, my own family was suffering and being damaged. Eventually, I concluded that we had to end the placement. The girls had had more than two, very life enriching years. They were significantly healed and yet my heart was breaking. I had learned to love two 'unlovable' little children. According to the older sister, I was the best daddy she had ever had. I had to break the news.

My wife and family are now healing from more than two traumatic years, but I am still going through a grieving process.

The transition to the girls' new family was done as well as it could be and they are well settled with a good family. We are now their respite carers and they stay with us for a weekend every six weeks. We look forward to it.

Questions for discussion

- Can foster carers become too involved or too attached to children in their care, so that it can be problematic for them?
- What support would help them deal with this?
- What would it be like deciding to end a placement?
- What might be the effects on both children and foster carers?

A young man who lost his way then found contentment

fostering teenagers



Fostering a teenager is a very different challenge from fostering younger children. Teenagers get a bad press – they are often perceived to be moody and difficult. However, caring for young people during this important phase of their life can be both stimulating and rewarding.

Matt's story

This young man was adopted at birth and this relationship was very successful until he reached 11 years of age. He then went completely off the rails – so much so that his adoptive family could not cope and he was back in the care system.

After five years with many placements and many times in court he came to my wife and me. It was hard and we did our best, but the straw that broke the camel's back was when he stole a car, knocked down a young girl and fled the scene of the accident. He was later arrested and I spent many hours in court and police stations. We managed to save him from prison, but then I sat him down and we had a long chat about where his life was going.

He decided that he wanted to meet his birth mother and, after help from many people, we found her. After many stressful months he then went to live with his mother and two step-sisters and, within weeks, he went on a training course and then found full-time employment.

That was four years ago and he now has a very proud mum and two satisfied foster carers.

Questions for discussion

- What qualities do foster carers need to have to help young people through difficulties such as involvement with crime or initiating or maintaining contact with their own families?
- How do the roles of male and female foster carers differ when fostering teenagers?

The difference a social worker makes

working with
children's services



Foster carers are part of a team of people working with each child or young person. This team should be a source of support and co-operation, but that isn't always the case. Here, one foster carer demonstrates the difference that social workers can make.

Warren's story

I would like to tell you a story, about two teams of social workers...

One of our fostered children was brought to us by his social worker when the foster carers he was with were going abroad with his two siblings and wouldn't take him. So, he came to us for two weeks respite care and ended up staying with us for five years.

His social worker stayed with us for some time going through his history, and we seemed to be getting a good working relationship with her. From then on, if she did not come and see us she would phone to make sure he was alright.

We kept working with her to get contact with his siblings once a month, which we, the foster carers, facilitated. Through this social worker we also had him assessed by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services who told us yes, he has some problems, but there is nothing we can do for him. So, back to square one then.

When he came to us he was going to a school a few miles away by taxi each day, but we worked with his social worker

to get him into a school near us as he had very severe learning difficulties. When any problems arose in school we only had to phone her and she would help to sort it out. During summer holidays she arranged for him to attend different activities. One year she arranged for him to join a team going for a week's outward-bound course run by the army cadets, which he absolutely loved, and another time she arranged for him to join in with a course that offered him a different activity each day.

Then one day she came to tell us she was applying to the Disability Social Work Team for help for him as, with his difficulties, he would need help all his life. It took around six months to get him accepted, but she stuck with it. She was great.

When the new team took over we did not see a social worker for two months, which was very scary for us. When we finally heard from the new social worker she came to tell us she was going on maternity leave and another would be appointed.

Two months further down the line social worker number two arrived and by now we were getting more and more trouble with him at school and we were feeling very stressed. The next time she came to see us she told us she was getting married and leaving to live in another part of the country. We were now awaiting our third social worker and, in the meantime, our fostered child was running wild in school and we were getting no support from social services.

'We felt we were blamed for the breakdown... even though we didn't have the support we needed.'

Social worker number three eventually arrived and we met about four times, but the problems were now so bad that the placement broke down. We felt we were blamed for the breakdown by social services, even though we didn't have the support we needed. This is something we have to live with every day and the feeling of failure breaks our hearts.

Questions for discussion

- What pressures can fostering services put on foster carers and what pressures are social workers under themselves?
- What things can hinder relationships between foster carers and social workers?
- What can help ensure good communication?

Reflections on fostering

Why foster? After some of the stories in this book you might be left wondering why anyone would choose to be a foster carer. Here is one response to that question.

Will's story

I know why we foster when I stop and think, recall, remember how a child was or children were when they came to us and the changes that occurred.

The look in a child's eyes as if nobody cares, or the child who hears somebody else say they are going to give up, without giving them that opportunity to trust or show how they care.

Every life is important, every person is important and it's finding a way to make children believe, respond, react and work with you to make things happen for them in a good, nice, enjoyable way. They need to know how much people do care, love and believe in them; that they do matter and that things that happen to them are important, worth talking about and that they are worth being listened to.

Nothing in life is easy, so I stop and reflect. I have made a difference, no matter how small, how insignificant, it is positive, it was me, it was us – and we did this.

Fostering is not always easy. Often there are difficulties, problems, hurdles, obstacles to work out. But working together, helping, teaching, believing – what a feeling you can have!

Try it, but never think it is going to be easy, a lot of work is involved, but there is no better feeling in this world.

'Nothing in life is easy, so I stop and reflect. I have made a difference, no matter how small...'



Men Who Care

In 2010 the University of Glamorgan's StoryWorks team ran a two-day storytelling workshop with a group of male foster carers to encourage them to share their unique experiences of fostering. The workshop was part of the **Men Who Care** project – a collaboration between StoryWorks and the Fostering Network.

This book contains some of the real-life stories that emerged from the workshop, reproduced in the men's own words, with minimal changes to protect confidentiality. The stories reflect the breadth of work that foster carers undertake and offer an insight into the world of fostering from a male foster carer's perspective.

These stories can be read as stand-alone narratives or can be used in training or support group settings or within the foster home. There is a brief introduction to each story to set the scene regarding the key issues and two or three questions at the end to prompt discussion.

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