

## **Fosterline Wales Factsheet**

### **Building resilience and supporting the mental health needs of looked after children**

#### **Introduction**

Without intervention, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can affect a person for life. Adults who experienced four or more ACEs as children are at higher risk of poor mental and physical health, and worse outcomes in general. Many fostered children in Wales have experienced four or more ACEs. The children who recover best from adversity are those with high levels of resilience. This factsheet explains more about resilience, and where you can learn practical ways to boost a child's resilience.

#### **What is resilience?**

Resilience is the ability to overcome significant adversity. It is a result of protective factors in the child's environment and the child's own coping skills.

Many children in foster care have been through multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These include direct abuse or neglect, and growing up in adverse conditions such as domestic violence, parental alcohol or other drug misuse, or parental mental health problems. At the point they enter foster care, their health and development may already have been negatively affected. They may lack protective factors. They may not have had the opportunity to learn healthy coping skills.

Children become resilient when they are supported by their caregiver. When this cycle happens:

- they experience stress emotionally and physiologically
- their caregiver provides reassurance, helping them to process and think about the trauma and give practical support
- they stabilise and produce their own internal strengths and learn to use external supports
- they are better equipped for the next traumatic event

Children who are not supported, experience adversity differently. When this cycle happens:

- the child experiences stress emotionally and psychologically
- the child is left unsupported
- the child is unable to stabilise and becomes chronically stressed
- the child is less equipped for the next traumatic event

## **Protective factors**

Protective factors are things outside the child – their caregivers, relationships with other adults, friendships, their community, housing, income, education, leisure. The biggest single protective factor is a healthy attachment to their caregiver in the first few years of their life, and a secure psychological base from which to develop and explore the world. Building a secure base for the first time after the first few years is challenging, but not impossible. The Fostering Network's book *Attachment* explains this in more detail and contains practical tips for foster carers.

## **Relationships**

Children need relationships with affirming, reliable, warm adults who care for them and care about them. Some children have this kind of relationship with one or more adults before they come into care. In this case, it is important to nurture that relationship. Many fostered children did not experience this kind of relationship before coming into care. Even if you are a short term carer, you can make a profound difference to the child's life by acting as a secure base. This concept is explained in The Fostering Network book *Attachment*, and the University of East Anglia's information on secure bases.

Foster carers provide a secure base when they are:

- available to the child
- sensitive, and able to help the child manage their feelings
- accepting, and building the child's self-esteem
- co-operative, so the child feels they are useful rather than passive and dependent
- including the child as part of the family, so the child feels they belong somewhere

Life story work and drawing up social network maps can help a child develop a sense of identity and where they feel they belong.

## **Having a voice, feeling valued and making decisions**

Having a voice and knowing you are heard makes a huge difference to how you experience adversity. As well as listening to the child yourself, support them to be heard by other professionals involved in their lives, such as teachers and social workers.

Focusing on a child's strengths helps build confidence and self-esteem. It makes them feel valued and competent, which in turn boosts resilience.

Knowing how to make decisions about your life and being allowed to make your own decisions are important skills for resilience. You can support a child to learn to make decisions by making sure they have relevant information, understand the information, think through consequences of decisions and then know how to communicate clearly with those around them. If you support them to practise these skills on decisions that won't have a major impact on their life (eg what to wear or eat), they will be better equipped to make bigger decisions in the future.

## Activities to boost resilience

- regular physical exercise, particularly outdoors
- mindfulness, breathing exercises and relaxation techniques
- any activities done alongside supportive, positive adults
- positive time spent with friends, whether in person or online
- learning activities - these can be informal (eg learning to cook) or formal (eg school or after school activities)
- sporting activities, particularly with a positive coach
- activities that promote self-control, emotional regulation, focus and planning ahead. The Fostering Network's books *Attachment* and *Education* have practical tips on how to do this. Working on these skills helps children recover from the negative effects of past ACEs and makes them more resilient to any future adversity.

## Looking after yourself

Resilience is not just for children. Foster carers experience adversity and need to make sure they have enough protective factors and strong enough coping skills to remain resilient. Growing your own resilience reduces your risk of burn-out and models the behaviours that will help your fostered child to become more resilient.

## How The Fostering Network can help

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 also email [fosterlinewales@fostering.net](mailto:fosterlinewales@fostering.net) or write to us at:

The Fostering Network  
Regus House, Falcon Drive  
Cardiff Bay CF10 4RU

### 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.

For more information on the web for support, visit our [Social pedagogy in practice resource: Building resilience](#)

## **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](mailto:sarah.mobedji@fostering.net).

## **Contact**

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:

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