Feckless, dangerous and damaged. Are teenagers who need foster care the challenge that some people believe? Radhika Holmström explores how we can recruit more carers for the over-12s

If it’s hard to find foster carers overall, it’s even harder to find foster carers who are prepared to foster teenagers. Services across the UK are struggling to recruit more people who will take on adolescents and see them through into adulthood. And it’s a significant problem as at least half of children in care across the UK are over the age of 10.

’All fostering services are finding it difficult to find foster carers for this age group,’ agrees Andrew Walker, who is a practice support consultant at The Fostering Network. ‘There are carers who have not had placements, so we have people who understand what fostering is but whose preferences are for younger children so they don’t have placements; we have teenagers who need placements but don’t have them. Can we encourage carers to think again about fostering teenagers?’

Myths and misconceptions
The first barrier, as everyone involved agrees, is the common perception that teenagers and young people (in or out of the public care system) are feckless at best and dangerous at worst. This is compounded by misconceptions about fostering itself, points out Gill Burtwell, team manager in Portsmouth City Council’s fostering recruitment and assessment team.

’I think there is a lot more press about young children needing fostering and adoption, whereas teenagers aren’t seen as young people who need families and looking after,’ she says.

’Many people believe teenagers are in care as the result of something they have done themselves, and that if they’re in a children’s home this is a form of punishment. People are genuinely absolutely surprised to learn that in fact there was no foster home available. Couple that up with teenagers, in terms of the bad press they get and the general portrayal of them as a group to be feared, and the two things feed into each other.’

While misconceptions about teenagers need to be challenged, it’s true that there are issues specific to fostering teenagers that carers will need to be prepared for. A report published in November 2014 by the National Audit Office highlighted that there are growing difficulties around finding secure places for girls who might be at risk of sexual exploitation. Teenagers might have witnessed or experienced drug or alcohol abuse that carers will need specialist skills to tackle. As new rules are coming into place across the UK allowing young people to stay with their foster carers until they are 21, people taking on teenagers may need to consider if they can commit to these young people beyond the age of 18. And helping young people achieve their potential in education and prepare themselves for adult life are also key tasks.

Realities
Phil and Lynn Duffy foster for Warrington Borough Council and have looked after a number of young people. ’People pre-judge young people, in terms of what they’re going to be, rather than sitting down and talking to them and finding out the things they like doing,’ says Phil. ’These young people can be amazingly confident on the outside but on the inside there isn’t a lot of confidence.’

In practical terms, the Duffys have also found that some things change as children grow up. ’When they’re younger...’
there's more contact with their family, whereas with older ones there's more contact with authorities and the school,' says Lynn.

Issues like delegated authority become even more pronounced at an age when other young people are learning to be more independent, while at the same time it's extremely important to put in place the boundaries that have often been missing before.

"You tend to find that they're way above their age – they've probably had to be the adult in the house – and have been allowed to do things that aren't age-appropriate, so they don't like coming into a house where there are rules over things like films. The one thing we've always said is: 'We're trying to keep you safe'," says Lynn.

The flip side, they both add, is that it can also be enormously rewarding. "We took one lad to the seaside for the first time – he went on about it for days. Those are the rewarding times, the happy memories you've put in their mind to replace the dark days."

So what strategies can help widen the pool of foster carers – both by helping to recruit more, and to retain the ones who are already working with adolescents?

**Tailored training**

The Fostering Network’s Andrew Walker has been working with a consortium in West Yorkshire – Calderdale and Leeds councils and two independent providers, Fostering Yorkshire and Foster Care Associates – which is aiming to tackle this by providing specialist training sessions.

‘The target group was people who weren’t fostering teenagers, but people who were already doing so were very interested too,’ he says. In fact, the 20 or so participants were fairly evenly split between potential and actual foster carers.

The recent two-day session started with focusing on people’s own teenage experiences and then moved on to the physical neuro-circuitry of the teenage brain. Lead trainer Maureen Coogan-Williams explains: ‘The prefrontal cortex hasn’t developed yet so teenagers react with their emotions, and their behaviour is determined by their environment, including other people. Then there are the hormones that are also present. Think of that, and then think about teenagers who are also dealing with trauma in their past.’

The trainees talked about stress, and how people react to this in chemical and neurological terms. After thinking about that, and looking at some real-life case histories, they also listened to presentations from other agencies working with young people on issues like alcohol and drug misuse.

‘There are a lot of those services out there, often run on a very local level with good local links. The speakers were really interesting on what was going on in the local area, and I think the people appreciated that,’ says Walker. Feedback has already been very positive – showing that moving from personal experience to the biological context to the local support systems can be a very good way to engage potential or existing foster carers for teenagers.

**Doing it differently**

The social pedagogy approach may also be particularly appropriate for this age group. The England-based Association of Directors of Children’s Services recommended social pedagogy in its 2013 report *What is Care For?*, finding that this approach eventually produces ‘a light-bulb moment’ when it becomes clear that it can bring improved outcomes.

Nicola Fearon is the fostering co-ordinator at Aberlour Childcare Trust, which is part of The Fostering Network’s Head, Heart, Hands social pedagogy programme and provides a lot of training in this approach for its foster carers. The trust works not only with the upper age range, but with young people for whom it is particularly difficult to find a home.

‘These are the children for whom local authorities have exhausted the options,’ she explains. ‘We need people who can understand what is relevant for teenagers in today’s society, especially around risk-taking behaviours. Social pedagogy works alongside the young person, so you’re living in their world. We still have issues and challenges, of course, but hopefully what we can do is work alongside them to work these out. Of course there are boundaries but it’s not a hierarchy. You’re helping them make choices; you’re creating opportunities for their own learning, not forcing them to do it.’
Targeted recruitment

It could be useful to examine the specific mindset of the people who might be prepared to foster teenagers. James Foyle, recruitment and retention consultant at The Fostering Network, explains how the charity has been carrying out research into this approach.

He says: ‘A national survey of almost 3,000 foster carers incorporating “Values Modes”, a psychographic classification theory used across industries to understand intrinsic values and beliefs, found that three-quarters of foster carers share a “pioneer” set of values. Characterised as altruistic, community-minded and keen to make a difference, pioneer values are well suited to the fostering task, but other Values Modes groups should not be ignored – just over 20 per cent have “prospector” values.’

In Portsmouth, Burtwell is exploring this research. She elaborates: ‘The prospectors are a very optimistic group: aspiring, seizing opportunities for themselves and other people – they’re very much about being the best and doing the best you can, and being optimistic about the future. They like new ideas and new ways of doing things and they take a lot of pleasure in recognition and reward. So when you think about the support that teenagers need – helping them move forward, maximising opportunities – the prospector group is almost ideal to help teenagers. They can advocate very strongly; they are the sort of people who challenge decisions and turn things round. Those qualities, we think, could really be harried in caring for teenagers. You can see results very quickly; you can do a huge amount, with things like help with school or personal presentation or self-esteem.’

That leads on to two things. The first is tweaking foster carer recruitment publicity to appeal to prospectors, both in terms of the medium – this group particularly responds to radio and digital media, including social media – and also the message. Rather than talking about helping, we need to say things like “be the one to inspire” or “be the one to lead the way”, or “could you be the difference?” says Burtwell.

Foyle adds: ‘One of the initial queries of someone with prospector values when making a fostering enquiry may be about what they will get in return for their input. This clearly won’t chime with many fostering services’ views of foster carers. Yet their drive to succeed and aspirations for recognition could make them a fantastic role model for a young person in foster care.’

He emphasises that it’s important to reward foster carers properly. ‘Fair payment and good support are essential for all foster carers. Those with prospector values in particular also need to be praised and recognised for the work they are doing. The right package of payment and support may also help to attract people with the right transferable skills from other fields.’

The importance of trust

‘Every teenager comes with their own baggage. The most important thing is to try to relate to them, understand that it is a difficult time for them, and try to gain their trust. If you haven’t got that, you can’t do any other work because otherwise they’ll always suspect you have another agenda and it can also be very difficult with someone who is absolutely bashing their head against everything.

‘You have to have open communication, and you won’t get that till you have established trust. You almost have to get to the point of putting your arm around them and tell them that yes, they will be safe and they will be looked after. But while you have to have the patience of a saint, it’s also very a different type of patience and very different work from fostering a young child.

‘You need a level head, know what you’re getting into and know how to engage with them. But don’t be naive. It can be very challenging and you have to be the adult who says it isn’t working, and something needs to change – but do it with the teenager, not behind their back. And you have to have your eyes wide open because it just may not work, whatever you do.

‘It’s not for everyone. I’ve come across carers who have taken in teenagers and just aren’t ready for that different type of fostering, because you’ve got to be able to give them independence and a sense of security, and you also have to go through the massive amount of baggage they have.

‘But we wouldn’t be doing it if it wasn’t rewarding. You see someone who was once broken, and who now, five years on, is independent and in a relationship and has a job. And that is wonderful.’

John Stanbridge from East Sussex, who fosters with his wife Sally

And looking at values in this way also uncovers, as Burtwell puts it, ‘an untapped extra group of people, and potentially one that would be particularly suited to teenagers. We know there are people out there who have the skills to work with teenagers. A lot of blokes who wouldn’t see themselves as foster carers are actually working all the time with young men as apprentices or similar roles. They’re showing an interest and helping them look at options and consequences. For us, the challenge is to reach outside to these people who’d never usually think that they work with young people but in reality have very good skills, empathy and understanding.’

The unheard stories

‘It’s very difficult to hear good stories about teenagers, about their achievements and the wonderful things they are doing,’ says Burtwell. ‘It’s also difficult to hear the stories from foster carers who have helped them do those wonderful things.

Phil Duffy concludes: ‘The first lad we fostered went from struggling at school to doing his exams. He’s happy and winning awards, and he’s now going on to his third year at college. I know it isn’t always the way but seeing him is brilliant.’

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