Are you wondering whether your fostered child might have a hidden talent for dancing? Did you lack confidence in drawing lessons at school? Is your family keen to go to the theatre? Radhika Holmström finds there are many projects that can help nurture creativity in children – and sometimes their foster carers too.

Acting, painting, taking photos, dancing, playing music, going to the theatre or taking part in any other sort of arts or cultural activity can bring benefits to any child. However, many children coming into foster care have had very little experience of the arts. And though schools do provide this to some extent, they cannot do it all. Indeed, at secondary level schools are increasingly squeezing out the arts, in accordance with the increasing emphasis on so-called ‘useful subjects’ and, in England in particular, the demands of the English Baccalaureate (a core group of subjects, which doesn’t include any arts).

The arts can often play a useful role in helping looked after children to try doing new things and explore their own feelings – they do not have to be specifically ‘therapeutic’ to be extremely useful. And taking this further, arts projects are a great way for foster carers and fostered children to explore their world together – they can play a role in a social pedagogic approach to fostering, with the shared art activity strengthening the relationship between the fostered child and the foster carer. For example, the fostering services involved in The Fostering Network’s Head, Heart, Hands programme have been focusing on creative activities with children and young people, including dance workshops in Surrey, photography in Hackney and exploring computer animation in Orkney (read more about the social pedagogic approach to fostering in our profile of Joy Harris on page 12).

However, it’s not always easy to know where to start. To that end, a number of cultural organisations have been working with looked after children – and often with their foster carers as well.

Starting with the carers
Arts Award is a set of qualifications which aims to support young people up to the age of 25 to grow as artists and arts leaders, developing their creativity, leadership and communication skills. The award framework motivates and celebrates young people’s artistic achievements in whatever type of artistic activity they choose to pursue, such as filmmaking, photography, poetry or dance.

Managed by Trinity College London in association with Arts Council England, there are five levels, starting with ‘discover’ and ‘explore’, through to bronze, silver and gold. The qualifications are recognised and accredited through the Qualifications and Credit Framework which covers England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

In March 2013, Trinity commissioned the National Children’s Bureau to work with families who foster, in order to build foster carers’ confidence in engaging with arts and cultural activities. The aim was to train foster carers to become Arts Award advisers (people who support children and young people through the award) for the first two award levels, ‘discover’ and ‘explore’.

Anyone with an interest in the arts can train independently to become an Arts Award adviser; but this 10-month programme, the Families who Foster Arts Award, operated...
rather differently. It worked specifically with foster carers to take them through to adviser status and to make the whole process one of family learning – at the same time as being trained as advisers, the foster carers would take children (their fostered children plus their own children or grandchildren) through the awards process too.

The local project partners were an arts centre in South Tyneside called The Customs House and South Tyneside’s looked after children education and care services; the national partners were the National Children’s Bureau, the Centre for Understanding Social Pedagogy, Trinity College London, and The Fostering Network.

‘I did wonder as to whether it would be successful or not, or whether people would take it up,’ says Angie Effard, fostering assistant with South Tyneside Council.

‘The word “art” does put people off but when you sit down and explain what is involved it’s not as daunting. Carers are really busy, of course, and we wondered how the logistics would work and how committed they could be – but I also felt it was definitely needed to offer looked after children the opportunities they might not have had earlier in their lives, before they came into foster care. Not many might have been to a theatre or a museum, or an arts display or anything like that. I think when they did sign up, they got a lot more than they initially expected – and the children even more so.’

During the course, carers and children aged between five and 12 took part in activities together, such as visiting the theatre, playing music and creating their own comic book characters. The end of the 10 months was celebrated with an Oscars-style awards ceremony at The Customs House theatre where films were shown that the young people had made.

All those involved stress how much the ‘working together’ aspect benefited everyone, and brought foster carers and children together; encouraging bonding as the groups got on with their activities and outings, and started building their portfolios. In fact, the need for a portfolio – which is a key element of any Arts Award – fits in very neatly with the requirement for foster carers to document and provide evidence of their work.

Michael Bettencourt, virtual head teacher for looked after children in South Tyneside, says he values the opportunity to encourage creativity: ‘We have to support children with academic qualifications, and sometimes that’s at the expense of their creative activities,’ he says, ‘I’m passionate about the benefits that the arts can bring. The fact that Arts Award leads to a qualification enables us to say that this number of foster carers have worked with this number of children; and as young people progress through the levels, they have equivalent to GCSEs and A-levels.’

This first programme was a pilot and it proved successful. In South Tyneside they have continued with the project – it’s now in its third round and has become a regular part of the offer to foster carers in the area.

Arts Award’s national reaching out programme manager Ruth Jones points out that she is keen to replicate the project in other parts of the country. ‘As a result of the project in South Tyneside, we’ve got a model, a way of working’, she says. ‘The success factors have been identified as the partnership between the fostering service, a cultural partner (which does need to be used to working with vulnerable children) and the LEA provider or virtual head teacher.’

Other opportunities

Though this is the only targeted Arts Award programme to date, it’s far from the only project working with looked after children. The nearby music venue Sage Gateshead runs weekly sessions and mentoring schemes for young people in care, young people leaving care and pre-schoolers who are being fostered, while in Cumbria Whitewood and Fleming Music and Arts specialises in working with vulnerable and traumatised young people – many of whom are in the care system – taking a social pedagogic approach.

Karen Rossiter was one of the first cohort to complete the Families who Foster Arts Award

“When my fostering support worker first asked me if I wanted to do it, I said, “No, I’m no good” – after all, I wasn’t very good at art at school. I still wasn’t convinced when I decided I would give it a go; it was mainly to give the kids – a little girl of five and her seven-year-old brother – something to keep them busy.

“From the beginning, the kids loved it. I’d pick them up from school and they’d be really excited about it all, asking “what are we doing this week?” and talking about doing their portfolios. In fact they did so much that they had to put their extra work in a scrapbook. We went to the children’s book centre Seven Stories where the kids did crafts, we wrote it up and we went to Sage Gateshead where we all played on the drums. They did two filming sessions too, and we all went to see the musical Cats.

‘Over the course of a few months, I got involved in cutting out and sticking things, and started loving it and wanting to do more. We all ended up with certificates – the little girl took hers in for show and tell at school – and I’m going to do the next level with the boy, and bring along his sister to join in the activities as well.

‘I’d tell someone else to give it a go. It’s not as hard as you might think and you’ll all enjoy it.’

If you are interested in offering training and/or running Arts Award, please get in touch with Ruth Jones, Arts Award Access and Inclusion at 020 7820 6178 or 07968 954452, or ruth.jones@artsaward.org.uk.

Karen Rossiter was one of the first cohort to complete the Families who Foster Arts Award
This spring in Wales, The Fostering Network has been running ‘Let’s Go!’ workshops in partnership with SuperStars, which provides extra-curricular activities for children, and the Millennium Stadium Charitable Trust. The main focus is on sport, but alongside this the participants have been taking part in craft workshops to decorate gym bags and to use the arts as a way of evaluating the project. During April and May there are more workshops across Wales which are using the arts with 11 to 18-year-olds to explore their experiences of education.

In Ramsgate in Kent, the charity Pie Factory Music provides free, accessible music and arts activities to children in the area, with a special focus on those in challenging circumstances, and a separate project for looked after children every year, working with Virtual School Kent and foster carers.

“We feel that it’s our duty to take creativity to the children and to make it accessible. Many of them may come across as not enjoying music and art, but that is more about how they’re experiencing school overall,” explains Pie Factory Music managing director Steph Dickinson.

“One project involved young people creating a digital ‘Life Book’, collecting all sorts of important information about themselves using music, film, art and photography to collate their memories, their interests and their aspirations into something which could be given to prospective carers in a new placement. Another project involved working alongside Virtual School Kent to assist in producing a film.’

In Kingswinford in the West Midlands, Jane Ahmed works with Chatback, a group of young people aged 11 to 18 who are either in care or the children of foster carers.

“We’ve been going for 10 years and mainly do film, but we’ve also done live drama performances,” Jane explains.

“We have a director, and bring in other professionals when we need them. They step into another world, and it’s all to do with using the arts in a way to communicate. We’re instilling skills like communication and taking the lead in people who find education very difficult, but we have kids doing GCSE drama and going on to drama school too. And the first young person has just graduated with a degree in film studies.’

Chatback’s latest production is a film exposing the dangers of child exploitation and trafficking, Anybody’s Child premiered in Dudley in October 2014, with the young stars walking along a red carpet into the Showcase Cinema. Actor Josie Lawrence, who was one of the cast members, attended too.

In Northern Ireland, the Fostering Achievement project, managed by The Fostering Network, aims to improve educational outcomes for fostered children. It takes a broad view of education, promoting learning and development in a variety of ways, including providing resources for music tuition and drama classes, helping children join in local activities such as choirs, running one-off workshops, such as a recent event with children’s illustrator Nick Sharratt, and much more.

“One participant in the project, 17-year-old Amy McCullough, has been able to develop her talents as an artist, with Fostering Achievement supplying Amy with a range of resources. Her manga-style fantasy illustrations are being commissioned from people as far away as Canada, and she is developing her skills through her A-level in art.

A positive difference

It’s true that getting children involved in arts and cultural activities takes time and energy. But foster carers don’t have to be creative types themselves – there are many organisations across the country focused on the needs of looked after children that could help.

As Pie Factory Music’s Steph Dickinson points out, the rewards can be worthwhile. “It’s about getting looked after children and young people to realise how much they do have to offer,” she concludes.

‘Many are still fighting huge battles – and when you listen to their stories, you realise how the challenges they’ve faced in life could take up all their energies. But we’ve seen the impact that creativity can have just by giving them the opportunity and seeing the positive difference it makes.’

The Fostering Network would love to hear other examples of arts projects across the UK that are open to fostered children and young people. Email us on editor@fostering.net or share your experience on our Facebook page.

To find out more about the forthcoming workshops in Wales, get in touch with the Cardiff office (see page 3).