



a place in the SUN

Joy Harris has had some tough challenges to face in her role as a foster carer – not least the murder of a young man she used to care for. **Victoria Neumark** finds out how she's made a new start and how The Fostering Network's social pedagogy programme is helping her to offer a warm, nurturing home to many children

A child runs up, bursting with news. 'Mum, mum! I did several lengths today.' Clutching his violin and a bag of swimming things, he tucks his hand into that of the tall woman who walks beside him, her braids swinging and her face wreathed in smiles. As Devante chatters eagerly about his forthcoming ninth birthday, the two link arms along a London street.

Another commonplace end to a school day, you might think. Yet this is not the child's birth mother. He is living under a special guardianship order which means that Joy shares parental responsibility with Devante's mother and Devante is settled with Joy until he's at least 18 (see the feature on page 8 for more about special guardianship). Joy also offers foster placements. Over the last four and a half years, Devante's home has included other children in short-term foster placements plus mothers and babies.

This sunny day, the focus is on swimming, cooking – 'you make the best burgers!' Devante affirms – who to invite to Pizza Express on Saturday, what cake aunty might make and how it will feel to wake up tomorrow, being nine years old. A quick burst of their favourite song, R Kelly's *The World's Greatest* ('I am a mountain, I am a tall tree...'), keeps the two entertained till they reach home and Money the dog's enthusiastic greeting.

Joy Harris is one of the first foster carers in the country to develop skills in social pedagogy under The Fostering Network's Head, Heart, Hands programme.

She had not long begun the course when her 22-year-old former fostered son Antonio was murdered in Hackney. The police have yet to arrest anyone or find a motive. Antonio and his sister had been cared for by Joy after their mother died, but by this stage, Antonio was living independently.

'It left me stunned,' says Joy. Since then, the family has moved to south London – this relocation is about new beginnings. The social pedagogy programme helped, she says. 'It gives you new ways to think about things.'

An initial year of monthly sessions introduced some basic social pedagogy. Head – sharing knowledge from academic research and established child development theories; Heart – emphasising emotions, recognising that everyone in the family has their own emotional and ethical needs; Hands – using practical tasks and everyday activities, the so-called 'common third', as vital opportunities for learning together and building bonds. Over the next three years, participants meet monthly to share progress, and they can also support each other online, via a dedicated Facebook group.



'You make the BEST burgers!' Devante, aged 9

The Fostering Network is pioneering this approach to building positive relationships which value carers as well as the children in their care. The idea is to support foster carers in a new way, encouraging them to reflect on their daily experiences.

Joy sees the programme as particularly helpful in the weight it places on thinking before acting. For example, if a child displays difficult behaviour – sent home from school, maybe – instead of simply policing the transgressions, you break down with the young person what they think has happened and why boundaries have been broken. And you are patient, however long it takes.

Looking for the meaning in behaviour rather than reacting to it has made Joy a better parent, she believes. 'It is not that I am less strict – Devante would say that I am strict! – but I uphold the boundaries in a less strict way.'

Joy is using the social pedagogy 'diamond model' (set out by Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011), which always focuses on the best in a situation, with Sarwat, her current mother with baby placement. Rather than dwell on Sarwat's challenges – learning difficulties, the aftermath of a Caesarean, rejection by her husband and wider family, cultural isolation – Joy and Sarwat create a timetable of care to help Sarwat keep her baby and meet Pakistani cultural norms. For instance, the baby had her hair shaved in the first week. 'The programme encourages you to look holistically, to take time, be patient and model the kind of behaviour you want,' she says.

It is no sterile formula, though. The social pedagogy notion of a 'common third' finds many expressions. Joy's immaculate home is full of musical instruments. 'We can sing and play for hours!' she says.

I don't go to the course folder when I am talking to someone. But by using some of the methods, we can find a way to express feelings

They all enjoy cooking, with curries a big favourite. Sarwat is teaching them new ways to prepare and serve food.

'Last night I saw Devante talking with Sarwat. She is teaching him Urdu,' Joy says. 'They were laughing.' Devante's birth parents are African-Caribbean and Anglo-Indian: Sarwat's heritage fascinates him. And he is determined to learn as many languages as possible.

Learning together creates new bonds and, in turn, greater security. When Devante came to Joy, just after starting school, he was classed as delayed. Now he is well above average.

Confidently, he declares that he is going to go to university. He reads all the time: current favourite is the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series. Over the summer, he chose extra tuition in English and maths over an adventure play scheme. When Joy offered him the chance to do both, he said, 'No, I'd rather spend extra time with you.'

Joy reflects back on fostering Antonio and his sister. 'When I first began to raise a child – and they came to me aged 10 and 11 – I had no help whatsoever. You fall back on what your own family did. That may not work, depending on the circumstances of that child. But now I am more open to thinking about what to do. The Head, Hearts, Hands programme really helps in that way. For example, recently someone talked online about running an activity day where all the responsibility was placed on the children. They had to



'Any children that come here are drawn to the dog... he's like a little counsellor'

schedule, to budget, to organise it. And the pleasure the kids got out of that. That is inspiring – practical ways to share responsibility, so the children are aware of the impact they can have.'

Joy uses social pedagogy every day. She and Devante cycle all over the common, taking the dog. It makes it easy to talk. Money the dog has been a great help, Joy says, in releasing her charges' emotions. 'The dog is the silent person you can hug and show love to. He's like a little counsellor: If you won't talk to me, talk to the dog. Any children that come here – and lots of children come here all the time – they are drawn to the dog.'

But family life is not a textbook exercise. 'I believe we need to be real,' Joy says, 'the biggest thing is to be there for someone. I don't go to the course folder when I am talking to someone. But by using some of the methods, we can find a way to express feelings.'

Many young people who have suffered disruption are afraid to express their strong, and sometimes challenging feelings, Joy believes. It is these feelings which erupt in difficult behaviour, but their foster carers will often be unaware of why they are acting in this way. 'I see so many people – maybe especially young men – who cannot express their feelings but are tortured by them. I have learned to wait, for as long as it takes, so we can talk. When we can talk, I can help you.'

Social pedagogy, Joy explains, works by meeting underlying emotional needs, rather than patterning behaviour. Modelling is not simply demonstrating how to act, it is also showing how to cope with emotions, which means carers acknowledging their own needs in turn. This is more challenging than traditional parenting approaches, but can also be more fruitful, as experience from other European countries has shown.

She puts it more simply. 'When we do something Mum likes as well as what the young people like, we all feel good.' On his birthday shopping trip, Devante settled on a big box of Lego. Joy decided to treat herself as well and nipped into Lush. 'I am going to get that pamper time in the bath – some day!' she laughs. But for now, time to sing with R Kelly 'I'm that little bit of hope' while Devante bashes his new drum set and the baby smiles contentedly. ●

Find out more about Head, Heart, Hands at www.fostering.net/head-heart-hands

