THE SKILLS TO FOSTER HANDBOOK

an introduction to fostering
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‘Think about fostering long and hard. Talk with your family. Don’t jump in without thinking very carefully. But if you do, it will be the best thing you’ve ever done.’

Jim Bond, foster carer and president of the Fostering Network
Welcome to The Skills to Foster

Every 22 minutes a child goes into care in the UK. Many of these children need to live with foster carers – for a few days, a few months, a few years, or all of their childhood. Foster carers make a huge difference to the lives of these children.

So we are delighted that you are embarking upon the journey to become an approved foster carer. The Skills to Foster training course will give you an introduction to the world of fostering and to the knowledge and skills you will require as a foster carer. It will also give you the confidence to work with other professionals.

Children are at the heart of The Skills to Foster, and research tells us that it is the quality of the relationship between children and their foster carers that is absolutely critical to each child realising their potential.

As you work your way through the course, this Handbook will help you to consolidate what you’ve learned, as well as giving you the opportunity to explore topics further and think through real life challenges you may face as a foster carer.

As you will find out, the challenges of fostering can be great, but the rewards are enormous. Becoming a foster carer might just be one of the most fulfilling things you and your family ever do.

Robert Tapsfield
Chief Executive
The Fostering Network

For more information about the support, information and advice the Fostering Network can offer you as a foster carer, please see page 260
Introduction

What is The Skills to Foster?

*The Skills to Foster* is the UK’s leading pre-approval training course for foster carers. It is produced by the Fostering Network, the UK’s leading charity for foster care.

Since the first edition of *The Skills to Foster* was published in 2003, it has helped thousands of foster carers embark upon caring for children with a firm foundation of skills and knowledge on which to base their everyday work.

The third edition builds on the success of previous editions and reflects the latest theory and practice in fostering, such as safer caring, dealing with the online world and new technology, and managing behaviour.

However, simply completing the training course and reading this *Handbook* aren’t enough to prepare you for your first fostered child. You will also need to complete a comprehensive assessment process and receive induction-level training on core topics. This will be the beginning of your ongoing training and development which will continue throughout your fostering career.

The aims of *The Skills to Foster*

*The Skills to Foster* will prepare you for a career in fostering by:

- explaining what being a foster carer involves
- enabling you to consider how fostering will affect your family and your way of life
- helping you to decide whether fostering is right for you and your family
- introducing you to the skills and knowledge you need to develop when you become a foster carer
- helping you to appreciate the difference that good foster care can make to a child’s life.
How *The Skills to Foster* works

The training course consists of six sessions for prospective foster carers – all of which are essential to attend. However, all the members of the family are involved in foster care, so there is also a separate session for your sons and daughters, if you have any.

Your trainers for *The Skills to Foster* will work from *The Skills to Foster Leaders’ Guide*. They also have a CD-Rom and a DVD that will provide them with all they need to run the course for you, including slides, case studies, activities and key information.

The training sessions are as follows:
1) What do foster carers do?
2) Identity and life chances
3) Working with others
4) Understanding and caring for children
5) Safer caring
6) Transitions
6a) Review & conclusion (this might be run as part of session 6 or as a stand-alone session)
7) My family fosters (for your sons and daughters)

Course participants should each have a copy of this *Handbook*. The course leaders will benefit from reading it too. The chapters of this *Handbook* correspond with the training sessions, with an additional chapter specifically for family and friends foster carers (approved kinship carers in Scotland). They will consolidate your learning by providing you with in-depth information as well as signposts to further reading and resources if you are interested in exploring anything further.

Each chapter has a set of tasks that you can consider in your own time and discuss with the rest of your family. These will help you to really get to grips with some of the issues that you cover, as well as think through how fostering will work in reality for you and your
As each training session concludes, your trainers will set you some home practice tasks to discuss at the start of the next session.

You are advised to spend two to three hours working through the relevant chapter after each training session.

As the Handbook takes your learning a step forward from the training, the aims set out at the start of each chapter are slightly different from the aims of each training session.

This Handbook will be a useful source of reference as you go through the pre-approval and assessment process and enter your first year as a foster carer.

If you have sons and daughters, they should have a copy of My Family Fosters, a handbook written specially for them. This may be provided by your fostering service when they attend their training session.

The Skills to Foster training is usually run alongside and as part of the foster carer assessment process. Your assessing social worker should explain exactly how your assessment will work and how or if the trainers will be involved in your assessment.

Family and friends foster carers

You may have applied to be a foster carer for a child who is already known to you or with whom you have an existing connection, perhaps because you are a relative or a family friend. In this case you will usually be assessed to be a ‘family and friends’ foster carer, or ‘approved kinship carer’ in Scotland.

The Skills to Foster training is just as important for family and friends foster carers as it is for other foster carers, because you will have the same responsibilities and face the same sorts of challenges. However, some things are a bit different when you are a family member or friend. Sometimes this means that things are more straightforward, but it can also make
them seem more complicated. The trainers will help you to think about these as you go through each of the training sessions.

Chapter 7 of this *Handbook* has been written specifically for people who are being assessed as family and friends foster carers, to help you to think about some of the extra things you need to be aware of. At the end of Chapter 7 there is a list of sources of further information and help.

**Theories and terminology**

During *The Skills to Foster* you will be introduced to four theoretical approaches: child development theory, attachment theory, social learning theory and social pedagogy. There is not the time in this course to go into great detail of each theory but it is likely that you will have the opportunity to study each in more depth as you develop your skills and knowledge after you are approved as a foster carer.

Each approach differs in its emphasis and approach, but they all emphasise the primary importance of the relationship between the foster carer and the child, and the significance to the child of what the foster carer does.

As you work through *The Skills to Foster* you may come across terms specific to the world of fostering that may be unfamiliar to you. There is a glossary at the back of this *Handbook* to help you with this, and if you need further explanation don’t hesitate to ask one of your course leaders or your assessing social worker.

**WE HOPE YOU ENJOY THE COURSE!**

*The Skills to Foster* team
The Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (England)

The Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care have built on the induction standards for staff who work in social care, and they identify foster carers as part of the children’s workforce. The standards have been adapted to meet the needs of foster carers and to reflect their unique role in looking after children in their own homes. They contain seven standards for foster carers:

1) Understand the principles and values essential for fostering children and young people.
2) Understand your role as a foster carer.
3) Understand health and safety and healthy care.
4) Know how to communicate effectively.
5) Understand the development of children and young people.
6) Safeguard children and young people.
7) Develop yourself.

All newly approved foster carers should evidence these development standards within 12 months of approval, or 18 months if they are family and friends foster carers (National Minimum Standard 20.3) and the standards should form the basis of learning and development programmes for new foster carers. Fostering couples may evidence the standards in one workbook but each must evidence the standards unless the fostering service agrees that a particular standard is not relevant to a foster carer. There are modified standards for short break foster carers and family and friends foster carers.

The TSD Standards recognise the importance of the work foster carers do and are intended to ensure that you have the best possible training, information and support from your fostering service. They acknowledge that you bring certain skills and knowledge to your role as a foster carer but, like any other professional, you need training and support to develop those skills. It is not about judging you and your abilities, it is about providing evidence of the skills you already have, identifying your future learning needs and making
sure that you are given the further training and support that will enable you to make a
difference to the lives of the children and young people you will be caring for.

*The Skills to Foster* course will enable you to make a significant start in evidencing some of
the standards and to provide additional information as part of your pre-approval training.

The activities in this *Handbook* will extend what you have learnt on the course,
encourage you to apply it to your own situation, and can be used as evidence that you
have understood the topics. There will also be many opportunities during the face-to-face
training to demonstrate your learning and start building evidence for the Standards.

Assessors will make use of your understanding of the input and the tasks you have
undertaken in the training for this purpose. The Department for Education has produced
a useful guide explaining more about the standards and how to use your workbook and
learning and development portfolio [www.gov.uk/government/publications/training-
is similar information for family and friends foster carers [www.gov.uk/government/
publications/training-support-and-development-standards-for-family-and-
friends-foster-carers](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/training-support-and-development-standards-for-family-and-
friends-foster-carers) and for short break carers [www.gov.uk/government/

The seven standards are each divided into a number of sub-standards. A complete list along
with the corresponding activities from the course and tasks from the *Handbook* can be
found on the Fostering Network’s website at [www.fostering.net/all-about-fostering/providers/the-skills-to-foster/third-edition](http://www.fostering.net/all-about-fostering/providers/the-skills-to-foster/third-edition). As you work through the tasks and the
home practice in this *Handbook* you will numbered references following them in brackets.
These indicate the *Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (England)*
that are covered by that activity. You can cross-reference them against the list online to
identify the learning outcomes.
About the authors

Caroline Bengo and Kathy Blackeby are from the Fostering Changes Training Centre. They train social workers and other professionals who support foster carers to facilitate the Fostering Changes programme, a 12-week practical parenting programme. Caroline and Kathy have social work backgrounds and are clinical specialists who also work with families in the Conduct Disorder Adoption and Fostering Team at the children’s department of the Maudsley Hospital in London. They provide supervision and training to other professionals, particularly those who work in mental health.

Caroline and Kathy wrote training sessions 1, 2, 3 and 4 and chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the Handbook.

Doug Lawson is a children’s services consultant who works extensively with fostering services. He has worked with the Fostering Network on a wide range of policy, practice and training issues and is the author of the All You Need to Know series of handbooks on foster care and planning for looked after children, and co-author of the Fostering Network’s quality assurance support package for fostering services.

Doug wrote training session 6 and chapters 6 and 7 of the Handbook.

Gill Barn has worked in local authorities as a practitioner and project manager in social services, with looked after children and young people, and also in youth justice. Gill has led and developed specialist work with girls and young women and has also been a member of a fostering panel.

More recently, Gill has worked in the voluntary sector on children’s rights and participation. She now works as a freelance trainer and consultant.

Gill wrote training session 7.
Jacky Slade has spent many years in social work and has experience of residential child care, child care social work and family placement services in the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors. She also focused on adopted young people for several years.

Jacky has worked with the Fostering Network as a regional consultant and contributed to the Fostering Network’s Department for Education-funded delegated authority project. She is the author of Safer Caring: a new approach and is currently a freelance consultant.

Jacky wrote training session 5 and chapter 5 of the Handbook.

The Skills to Foster editor, Julie Pybus, has worked closely with the Fostering Network over the past 12 years, firstly as editor of Foster Care magazine and more recently as editor of a wide range of books for foster carers, including Safer Caring: a new approach and Fostering in a Digital World: a common sense guide.

Julie is a freelance editor and writer who helps voluntary organisations and social enterprises to create publications and websites. She has also written for The Guardian, The Observer and a variety of other outlets.
Acknowledgements

The Fostering Network would like to thank everyone who has contributed to the third edition of *The Skills to Foster*, as well as those involved in the first and second editions upon which this builds.

*The Skills to Foster* was first published in 2003 (replacing *Choosing to Foster*). A revised second edition was published in 2009 which comprised nearly 40 per cent new material and included a revamped *Record and Resource Book* to help prospective foster carers provide evidence for the *Training Support and Development Standards* in England which were then overseen by the Children’s Workforce Development Council.

Early in 2013 the Fostering Network invited a selection of public authorities and independent fostering providers from across the UK to take part in consultation focus groups to review *The Skills to Foster*. We believe it is vital that those at the frontline of foster care training are involved in the process of updating key materials such as these.

The following services participated:

- **England**: Barnardo’s West Midlands, Bath and North East Somerset Council, Families Fostering, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council and Wolverhampton City Council
- **Scotland**: North Ayrshire Council
- **Wales**: Bridgend County Borough Council
- **Northern Ireland**: Kindercare

The feedback from these consultation focus groups, other scoping activities, plus the Fostering Network’s experience of working closely with foster carers and services, informed *The Skills to Foster* third edition.

A collaborative group of expert authors – Caroline Bengo, Doug Lawson, Gill Barn, Jacky Slade and Kathy Blackeby – worked with the team at the Fostering Network to produce the new *Leaders’ Guide* and *Handbook*. These were piloted in February 2014 with the following services:
• **England:** Barnardo’s West Midlands, Families Fostering, Wiltshire Council and Wolverhampton City Council
• **Scotland:** North Ayrshire Council
• **Wales:** Bridgend County Borough Council
• **Northern Ireland:** Kindercare

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*The Skills to Foster* training films are completely new. They were created by production company Zetteler & Dunn with the team at the Fostering Network. Many thanks to the foster carers, sons and daughters, fostered children and young people and social workers who volunteered to be interviewed and to appear in these films to encourage and support others preparing to foster.

Many people at the Fostering Network have been involved in the production of the third edition but particular thanks should go to Andrew Walker, Christina Nelson, Daisy-May James, Diane Heath, Freda Lewis, Joanna Adande, Judy Bell, Lizzie Nelson, Kathleen Toner, Lucy Peake, Louise Horne, Margaret Kelly, Maria Boffey, Nikki Gregg, Sara Lurie, Sarah McEnhill, Sarah Mobedji, Sab Jagpal, Helen Keaney and Robert Tapsfield.

We will continue to evolve *The Skills to Foster* as practice develops. If you have any comments, questions or suggestions please contact training@fostering.net