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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

Our thanks go to all the services, trainers and participants involved in the consultation groups and pilot courses which gave much insightful feedback.
We are also grateful to the peer reviewers for their vital input. These were: Professor Gillian Schofield, head of the School of Social Work at the Centre for Research on Children and Families, University of East Anglia; Professor Pat Petrie from the Centre for Understanding Social Pedagogy, Institute of Education, University of London and Valerie Dunn, research associate at the University of Cambridge/NIHR CLAHRC East of England.

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, Sab Jagpal, Sara Lurie, Sarah McEnhill, Sarah Mobedji, 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
**About the authors**

**Caroline Bengo** and **Kathy Blackey** 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.
Welcome

Working on this fully revised edition of *The Skills to Foster* has yet again brought home to me the enormity of what we have come to expect from foster carers today.

Foster carers must know about the legislative and regulatory framework within which they work. They must understand child development. They must feel comfortable and confident about representing and championing children’s needs. And they must be able to work in partnership with a range of other professionals to help children achieve their potential.

For each child in their care, they must understand what the plans for the child are, how best they can help the child, how the child may have been affected by their past experiences, who the child can and cannot have contact with and why, how the child is progressing at school, and which decisions are delegated to them.

*The Skills to Foster* will assist new foster carers to meet these challenges by providing them with an introduction to the world of fostering and to the knowledge and skills they will require. Children are at the heart of this important training course, and key topics — such as the importance of identity, positive approaches to challenging behaviour; dealing with new technologies such as social media; and the new approach to safer caring — are introduced as inter-related themes throughout.

The third edition of *The Skills to Foster* has been created by the Fostering Network to reflect the needs of the modern foster care workforce, including addressing the specific additional needs facing those who are becoming family and friends foster carers, or approved kinship carers in Scotland.

With more flexible and comprehensive content, *The Skills to Foster* provides a training tool for fostering services which will empower trainers to respond to the needs of their service and each individual prospective foster carer.

We hope that using this new edition of *The Skills to Foster* helps you to create a team of foster carers who are committed, well-trained and competent — and, most importantly, have the potential to make a positive difference to the lives of the children that your service needs to care for.

Robert Tapsfield
Chief Executive
The Fostering Network
Foreword

The training and preparation of new foster carers through *The Skills to Foster* is of the greatest importance for the future wellbeing of vulnerable children in the care system. Whether foster carers are caring for newborn babies or adolescents, caring for children short term or long term, they need the best possible foundation of knowledge and skills. Foster carers can then build on this foundation throughout their fostering career, as they enjoy the rewards and face the challenges of caring for children with a wide range of needs.

This third edition of *The Skills to Foster* draws on a wide experience of what is helpful to carers and has been revised and updated to capture new developments in our approach to caring for children, valuing both the healing power of attachment relationships in the foster family and the role that foster carers play with children’s wider families and with the range of professionals in the team around the child.

There is no doubt that high quality training and support enables foster carers to transform the lives of troubled children. *The Skills to Foster* provides an important framework for helping new foster carers to understand the needs of children, the nature of the foster carer’s role and the support that they can expect from fostering services to help them to achieve successful outcomes for children.

**Professor Gillian Schofield**  
**Head of the School of Social Work**  
**Centre for Research on Children and Families**  
**University of East Anglia**
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, which represents thousands of foster carers across the country and aims to make foster care better for the children who rely on it. 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.

This new version of The Skills to Foster has been completely rewritten and features brand new films on the DVD. It reflects the needs of the modern foster carer and now has more flexibility, empowering trainers to respond to the needs of their fostering service and to their particular group of participants.

However, simply completing the training course and reading the accompanying Handbook aren’t enough to prepare people for fostering their first child. Participants will also need to complete a comprehensive assessment process and receive induction-level training on core topics. This should form the basis of ongoing professional training and development which will continue throughout their fostering careers.

The aims of The Skills to Foster

The Skills to Foster will prepare course participants for a career in fostering by:
- explaining what being a foster carer involves
- enabling them to consider how fostering will affect their family and their way of life
- helping them to decide whether fostering is right for them and their family
- introducing them to the skills and knowledge they need to develop when they become a foster carer
- helping them to appreciate the difference that good foster care can make to a child’s life.

The structure of The Skills to Foster

The training course consists of six sessions for prospective foster carers, all of which are essential for effective preparation. As all the members of the family are involved in foster care there is also a separate session for sons and daughters of prospective foster carers. 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 sons and daughters)
Training resources

The Skills to Foster consists of a variety of resources for course leaders, as follows:

- The Leaders’ Guide.
- The Handbook.
- A CD-Rom.
- A DVD.
- *My Family Fosters*, a handbook for sons and daughters of foster carers.

**The Leaders’ Guide**

This Leaders’ Guide contains instructions and information for course leaders to plan and deliver the training sessions.

Each training session is divided into a series of activities and we clearly explain the purpose of the activity, the resources you’ll need, and we provide you with a step-by-step guide of what you need to do.

Where we think it’s useful, we’ve included some ‘trainer’s tips’ to help you make the most of the activity.

The ‘points to cover’ sections outline key messages that will be useful to address during group discussions and presentations. The ‘points to cover’ have deliberately been kept brief so that they can act as prompts for you when you are delivering the training sessions. You will find more detail relating to these points in the Handbook. Therefore, it will be useful for each trainer to have a copy of the Handbook and to study it when preparing to deliver each session.

All the case studies have been specially devised for the course and there are no references to real-life children, young people or adults.

**The Handbook**

The Handbook is written for the course participants and they should each have a copy. As explained above, the course leaders should also have their own copy as it contains the detail of much of the material that you will deliver during the training.

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). The aim is to consolidate participants’ learning by providing them with in-depth information as well as signposts to further reading and resources if they are interested in exploring anything further.

Each chapter has a set of tasks for participants to consider in their own time and discuss with the rest of their family.

As each training session concludes, there are home practice tasks to set for participants. These are included at the end of each chapter of the Handbook.
Participants are advised to spend two to three hours working through the relevant chapter after each training session.

As the Handbook takes participants’ 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 your participants go through the pre-approval and assessment process and enter their first year as foster carers.

The CD-Rom
The CD-Rom contains copies of all the visual aids and documents to be used in the training, including the slides saved as a PowerPoint presentation.

You will need to print out the number of handouts and other materials you’ll need before the session.

The CD-Rom also includes a certificate of attendance for the course and template evaluation forms for both individual sessions and the course as a whole.

The DVD
The DVD shows films of foster carers, their families and care-experienced young people talking about the topics covered in each session. These have been filmed especially for The Skills to Foster. The DVD is a useful tool to provide a starting point for discussion and is a powerful way of bringing real life experiences of fostering into the course.

We have suggested activities using the films on the DVD, but these are intended to be flexible and can be adapted to your needs. We recommend that you watch the DVD before running the course to identify the elements which would be most useful to you.

My Family Fosters
This is a handbook for the sons and daughters of foster carers. This may be provided by your fostering service when they attend their training session.

Running the course

The course leaders
Each session should be led by two people, one with experience as a foster carer who is able to refer to their own practice. It’s important to make the most of the foster carer leader’s contribution by planning time for it in the programme. The other leader will usually be a fostering social worker. It is essential that at least one of the leaders has experience of delivering training and facilitating groups.

Ideally, both leaders should have attended a The Skills to Foster: Train the Trainers course prior to delivering The Skills to Foster so that they have an understanding of the process of training, what is required of leaders and an awareness of their own skills and knowledge. The Fostering Network provides this training – see our website for more information.
As leaders it is important to work out how you will work together, who will take the lead in each activity and how you will support each other before, during and after the delivery. There are many advantages to co-delivering and this can also throw up challenges for you as leaders working together. The more you have prepared and agreed your roles and responsibilities, the more likely it is that your co-delivery will work well and you will feel supported by one another. We recommend that you meet together at least once prior to delivering *The Skills to Foster* to work through all these aspects of co-delivery.

You’ll need to work out in some detail how you will use the material you draw from experience. It’s very important that anecdotes and illustrations are kept to the point to help keep the learning on track. Remember that you need to disguise the identities of any children and adults you talk about and tell the group that you have done so.

At the end of each session it is beneficial to debrief and provide feedback to each other as leaders since this allows you to learn from each other and to build your confidence and skills individually and in co-delivery.

It is good practice to consider bringing in other people to help to deliver or give input to some sessions of the course. For example, a young person who is or has been in foster care could offer a useful perspective, as could sons and daughters of existing foster carers.

**The assessment process**

We recommend that *The Skills to Foster* is run alongside the assessment of prospective foster carers. This is to ensure that the topics they have covered are fresh in the minds of participants, and so that they can raise any questions or concerns they have with their assessing social worker at the earliest opportunity.

You will need to decide how information about participants will be used and make this explicit to the group.

You should make it clear to participants if these sessions are part of their assessment and how they will be assessed during them.

If one of the course leaders is involved in the assessment of some but not all of the participants, explain that you will be sharing information about the progress of the course with your colleagues. Make it clear that if anything arises as part of the course which gives you cause for concern about a group member’s suitability or safety to be a foster carer, you will need to pass the information on to their assessor.

**A flexible approach to planning**

*The Skills to Foster* is flexible – the experience, skills and knowledge of participants varies enormously and you will need to adapt the training to suit their needs and the needs of your fostering service.

The sessions can be timetabled as you require. You could deliver the course, for example, over a series of six weekly evening sessions, or in blocks of more than one session at weekends.
The activities within each session can be adapted, although we suggest that they are delivered in the order that they appear as key topics are introduced and then built upon throughout the training.

Every effort has been made in the course materials to represent the diversity of foster carers and fostered children. Every local area and fostering service has its own particular characteristics so you may find it useful to pick out certain case studies to work with, or even adapt them to reflect local circumstances. You may also wish to supplement the UK-wide information that we provide by giving participants facts and figures relating specifically to your own country or locality.

People learn in different ways and the activities use a range of delivery methods. However, it will be useful for you to observe what engages your participants the most and adapt the way that you deliver the course if necessary.

If any of the course participants has a disability you will need to consult with them to find out what they need to participate fully in the course. Some activities require moving around the room and in many cases we have suggested alternative options if necessary.

We recommend that you leave enough time between training sessions, ideally a week, for participants to reflect upon what they have learnt and work through the corresponding chapter in their Handbook.

Session 6a Review & conclusion can be delivered just after you complete Session 6 or at a later date, but we recommend there is no more than one week between them.

We estimate that each session will take up to four hours. However, the timings given for the activities are estimates and will vary according to your group and any adaptations you make to the course content.

**Theoretical approaches**
During The Skills to Foster four theoretical approaches will be introduced: child development theory, attachment theory, social learning theory and social pedagogy. While there is not the time in this course to go into great detail of each theory, we feel it is important to introduce these approaches now as they are fundamental to the work of foster carers today. Participants will have the opportunity to study each in more depth in future training after they are approved.

**Session 7: My family fosters**
Sons and daughters of foster carers play a significant role in fostering, and can have a big impact on the success of a placement, so Session 7 of The Skills to Foster is for the sons and daughters of potential foster carers. It is an activity-based session that encourages them to think about what fostering will mean to them. Detailed instructions for delivering this session are included at the beginning of Session 7 in the Leaders’ Guide. As with the other sessions, these activities can be adapted to suit the levels of understanding, ages and needs of the group of participants who are attending. Ideally, one of the trainers for this session should be the son or daughter of foster carers themselves.
We recommend that those attending the session are given a copy of *My Family Fosters* to take away and keep afterwards, as well as the contact details for the social worker who will be providing them with support when their parent(s) are approved to foster.

**Family and friends foster carers/approved kinship carers**

If there are applicants to become family and friends foster carers (or approved kinship carers in Scotland) in your group you will need to pay particular attention to meeting their specific needs.

The circumstances which lead to family and friends applying to become foster carers are often very different from those of other applicants. They may be responding to a family crisis and planning to foster a child with little time to consider everything that this involves and the impact on their lives, whereas other applicants will probably have been thinking about fostering for some time and have chosen their moment to apply. For family and friends applicants everything may be happening in a bit of a rush with a lot of information to take in all at once, and with the added complication of being directly involved in a family where a child has had to become looked after.

Family and friends applicants are being assessed to foster a specific child (or children) and so have the advantage of being able to focus some of the activities in *The Skills to Foster* on a real child who is known to them, rather than thinking in the abstract. Sometimes they may already be looking after the child under some arrangement other than fostering, or because they have been given temporary approval as a foster carer. Other applicants may benefit from the experience that they can share in such circumstances, although you will also need to make sure that family and friends applicants are not misjudged because of the shortcomings of close family members. Be careful to ensure that these factors do not unduly skew group dynamics.

Family and friends foster carers have all the same rights and responsibilities as other foster carers, and need to understand the role of foster carers in the context of their existing relationships. Often they have additional challenges to face compared with other foster carers, and these may need tailored support.

There is a section at the end of each session in the Leaders’ Guide that highlights the key issues to bear in mind in relation to family and friends applicants. In England, you may find it helpful to provide applicants with a copy of the Fostering Network’s book *All You Need to Know: Family and Friends Foster Care*.

**Managing distress**

For participants to get most from the course they need to think about emotive subjects in depth. In trying to understand some of the feelings of children and their families, participants will draw on their own experiences. This may mean confronting feelings of loss and separation and listening to viewpoints which may be different from their own. It may also evoke painful memories.

Often group members express strong feelings in response to particular topics or discussions. This can be positive because the ability to recognise and acknowledge powerful feelings can be a valuable skill for carers.
Discuss with your co-leader how you might respond if someone becomes distressed and agree any strategies in advance. For example, if someone leaves the room, consider whether it would be a good idea for a leader or a group member to follow them. Some people may prefer privacy. You will still have to make an on-the-spot decision about the best approach for a specific situation, but it will help to establish some basic principles together. Consider whether it is possible to have another colleague available to offer support to anyone who might become distressed, in order to avoid course leaders having to leave the training room.

The leader has a responsibility to the group as a whole. If someone’s anger or distress is such that it demands a large proportion of a group’s time and energy, it’s a good idea to discuss the issues privately with the person. Occasionally, someone raises personal issues in a way that gets in the way of progressing the session. You may want to talk personally to the person concerned and suggest where they might get the support they need.

Don’t underestimate the impact of the course material and people’s reaction to it on you as a course leader. Thorough preparation with co-leaders and openness about relevant personal information may help. It can also be useful to discuss how you will support each other during the session and what you can each do after the session to look after yourself.

Building in time to debrief each other after every session can offer opportunities to talk through any issues that have had an impact on you emotionally or challenged you.

Evaluation
Each session should be evaluated using your own preferred method or by using the evaluation form template we have provided on the CD-Rom.

Standards and qualifications

The Skills to Foster is closely linked to occupational standards and qualifications across the UK. It reflects best practice as recommended by the Fostering Network.

There is legislation and prescribed standards covering the provision of fostering services across the UK. These set out how foster carers should be assessed, approved and supported, and require all foster carers to receive ongoing training to support their professional development. In England, Northern Ireland and Wales, fostering services have to operate according to the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services. Each country has its own versions of the standards. In Scotland, the National Care Standards: Foster Care and Family Placement Services apply.

The Skills to Foster assumes that fostering services will be using a competency-based assessment process. Many of these competencies can be demonstrated through completion of The Skills to Foster assessment materials. This method puts an emphasis on the skills and knowledge required to be a foster carer, helping social workers to identify the qualities and experiences that each applicant would bring to fostering.

In England, foster carers need to evidence the Training Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (TSD 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 and workbooks for short break foster carers and family and friends foster carers.

The content of *The Skills to Foster* is mapped throughout to the TSD Standards, and many of the activities in the training sessions and tasks in the *Handbook* can be used to evidence them. A creative use of all the material in the *Leaders’ Guide* and the *Handbook* is recommended for evidencing purposes. This will require trainers and assessors to develop a high level of familiarity with the content of the *Leaders’ Guide*, the *Handbook* and the TSD Standards.

A complete list of the TSD Standards, along with the corresponding activities from the course and tasks from the *Handbook*, can be found on the CD-Rom or 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). At the same link you will also find information on how *The Skills to Foster* links to other UK standards and regulations.


**Keeping up to date**
As standards and legislations change, the Fostering Network will review *The Skills to Foster*. As necessary, we will produce supplementary materials or replacement handouts. Please see [www.fostering.net](http://www.fostering.net) for the latest information or contact the office in your country.

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**Terminology**

*The Skills to Foster* introduces terms that may be unfamiliar to participants. There is a glossary at the back of the *Handbook* as well as ‘jargon busters’ throughout to help them with key terms.

We have endeavoured to use consistent terms throughout *The Skills to Foster* to avoid confusion. There are a few listed here for you to take note of, but you may also find it useful to familiarise yourself with the glossary in the *Handbook*.

**Child**
We use this term to refer to anyone who is under the age of 18. When specifically referring to over-12s we use the term ‘young people’.
**Foster carer**
We use ‘foster carer’ rather than ‘foster parent’, ‘foster mother’ or ‘foster father’ as it is not the role of the foster carer to replace the child’s parents.

**Fostering service**
An organisation that is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, supervision, management, training and deployment of foster carers. This could be either a public authority or an independent fostering provider.

**Looked after**
This is a term used to refer to all children who are cared for by a public authority.

**Public authority**
An authority that has responsibility for providing care for children who are looked after. In England, Wales and Scotland these are local authorities. In Northern Ireland these are health and social care trusts.