



The Reflective Fostering Programme

Delivery of the Reflective Fostering Programme by social work professionals and foster carers: results of a research study

Introduction

We know from research that a secure, supportive foster care placement helps to give children and young people in care the best chance in life. But foster carers often report that they don't get the specialist training they need to support these children.

The Reflective Fostering Programme (RFP) is a group programme for foster carers with teaching, activities, and group discussion. The RFP aims to support foster carers to develop stronger and more supportive relationships with the children and young people in their care. RFP consists of ten, three-hour sessions, and aims to promote a 'reflective fostering' approach; that is taking a reflective stance about both foster carers' own feelings and those of their foster child.



The RFP was first developed and evaluated in 2017/18 and showed promising results, with improvements in foster carers' stress levels and a reduction in foster children's behavioural and emotional difficulties. In this first study, the Programme was run by trained staff from the NSPCC, but social work managers were interested to know whether social workers could be trained to deliver it together with an experienced foster carer. Foster carers felt that delivery of the programme by a fellow foster carer could enhance feelings of trust and reduce feelings of judgement associated with training delivered only by social work professionals.

Building on this feedback, we implemented these changes and conducted another study in 2019/2020 with the following aims:

1. To see whether the RFP could be successfully co-delivered by a social worker and an experienced foster carer
2. To explore whether this revised version of RFP was equally effective in improving the wellbeing of both foster carers and their foster children.



What happened in the study?

36 foster carers took part in the RFP between May and December 2019 in the Kent Local Authority. They all were asked to complete a set of questionnaires before starting the Programme, at the end of the Programme, and again four months later. These included questions about their own stress and wellbeing, their relationship to the child in their care, and how they felt the child was doing. In addition, foster carers took part in focus group interviews at the end of the Programme.

What did we learn?

There was a good level of interest among foster carers in joining the Programme, and of the 38 foster carers who started the Programme, all completed it, and showed high attendance levels (87%). In focus group interviews, foster carers explained that they particularly valued the group component of the Programme, the open and non-judgemental space the sessions provided and the relevance and value of the content of the Programme.

Foster carers reported that a particular strength of the Programme was the fact that it was delivered by a social worker and a foster carer:

“The empathy for what we’re going through helps. [Facilitator 1 - an experienced carer] has got empathy for what’s been going on because she’s doing that herself and [Facilitator 2 - a social worker] can see that side and can see the other side of what other people deal with, so she sees more of what the role of being a foster carer involves”

One thing foster carers liked about RFP, which they felt was a bit different to other trainings they’d been on, was the focus on carer wellbeing and learning through experience:

“I’ve done those other sorts of courses before and the tools are really helpful and all the rest of it and you find the same sorts of things called different things in different programmes and theories and the rest of it. I think the most useful thing for me is that feeling of being listened to in a non-judgemental way and being held, contained in that way. We have to hold and contain the children all the time, you come to this sort of thing and you get it back”

Did the Programme have an impact?

Although the number of participants in this study was quite small, the initial findings show several promising changes, including:

- A reduction in foster carers' stress levels (as measured by the Parent Stress Index)
- An increase in foster carer's reflective capacity (as measured by the Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire)
- A reduction in the severity of the problems related to their relationship with their child that foster carers had identified at the start of the programme (as measured by the Carer Defined Problems)
- Improvements in foster children's behavioural and emotional wellbeing (as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Emotion Regulation Checklist).

In the focus group interviews, foster carers also reported improvements in several aspects of their life. For instance, many foster carers reported a reduction in stress and exhaustion, as well as a sense of feeling less "alone" from talking to others facing similar challenges in their roles:

"I think it's helped me take ownership of the way I feel sometimes and it's made me, rather than brush it under the carpet - it's made me face up to things that are quite hard sometimes, but it's also made me then take a step back and think about it, and perhaps change how I react to things. So it's actually made me stand up and own myself basically I suppose".

Most foster carers spoke about the Programme providing them with new "tools in the toolbox" for their work with the foster children. There was emphasis that these "tools" went beyond providing a list of strategies but allowed foster carers to "reflect on" their feelings and experiences.

Foster carers also told us that, because they felt helped, they were able to better support the children in their care:

"I think that's important as well because a lot of the courses we go onto have a lot about attachment, this theory, that theory, and we're told 'this is why this, this is why your children is doing it', but none of them actually step back and say 'you are ok, you are important in this' and if we look after ourselves, how that's gonna benefit the child"



Conclusion

The RFP as delivered, by a social worker and a foster carer, shows promise as an approach to supporting foster carers. It helped to reduce carers' stress and improved their own and their foster children's wellbeing.

These preliminary findings are promising but there are still questions to be answered: how does it compare to other programmes or usual support foster carers receive from Local Authorities? How helpful is the programme for different groups of foster carers or children e.g. those in kinship care?

We hope these questions and others will be answered in future research we are now beginning, which will involve the RFP being offered to foster carers and kinship carers across the UK.



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