

# The Reflective Fostering Programme

## An Introduction

### What is the Reflective Fostering Programme?

We know what a tough job it is being a foster carer and how, even the most experienced of you, can be tested to the limit at times. Through The Reflective Fostering Programme, we aim to help support you in these sometimes very difficult times, because how you think and feel has a very big impact on how your foster child behaves in your home. You will join a group of up to 9 other foster carers for ten, three-hour sessions, run by social care staff and experienced foster carers who will support you to promote 'reflective fostering'; that is being able to think about your own thoughts and feelings and those of your foster child, and to figure out the meaning of their sometimes hard-to-read behaviour. Reflective Fostering is underpinned by an approach called 'mentalizing approach'. This approach encourages you to be curious about your own thoughts and feelings, and the thoughts and feeling of your foster child. In each group session you will spend some time learning about how mentalizing can help you in your relationship, some time in group discussion with other foster carers and you will be given some handy tools to help you mentalize yourself and your child or children. When the Programme was first evaluated, foster carers who took part reported feeling less stressed, better able to respond to the child's needs, and the children's well-being improved.

### How is Reflective Fostering similar or different to other parenting programmes?

The Reflective Fostering Programme is similar to some other programmes if you have ever been part of a support group, as it brings together foster carers with different and some similar experiences who can support each other as well as learn from the group facilitators.

It is different from other programmes for foster carers or parents in that the main focus is on your feelings and reactions to your foster children and to being a foster carer. Those of us who developed the programme and run the groups are very interested in what it's like for you as foster carers to be faced with some of the daily challenges that come with looking after children with difficult histories and traumatic backgrounds. We believe that to do this job to the best of your ability, it is helpful to have a programme that supports you in your role and doesn't put all the focus on managing your child. The other main difference is that The Reflective Fostering Programme puts your relationship with your foster child at the heart of the programme.

### How does the programme fit with other support provided by Local Authorities?

We are aware that there is a huge range and variation in what kind of support is currently offered to foster carers. One of the advantages of the RFP is that it doesn't try to 'replace' other models or require you to give up other ways of working, and it shouldn't contradict existing programmes. Instead, The Reflective Fostering Programme provides a kind of framework and gives you a 'stance' to take in relation to your everyday interactions with your foster child. We know that many of you have already had a lot of training and it might feel confusing to be on another course, but this shouldn't compete with anything you already know but rather will add an extra layer that will help you to be aware of and then bring under your control some of your thoughts and feelings about yourself and your foster child. With this increased awareness, you will start to see that the feelings and responses you have around your child become easier to manage and regulate, and then in this more regulated frame of mind, you are in a better position to go back to the situation with your foster child with a

fresh perspective and some insight into both yourself and hopefully them, that prevents situations from rapidly escalating.

### **Is this Programme designed only for new foster carers?**

No, Reflective Fostering is designed to support foster carers and the children in their care regardless of how long they have been caring for children.

### **What if I am a kinship carer?**

RFP is designed for both mainstream foster carers and kinship carers. While the experience of kinship carers is different to mainstream carers, the programme supports everyone to reflect on their experiences in building a stronger relationship with the child they are caring for. It is very helpful for the group to hear the perspective of kinship carers and when we do a piece of work called the Carer Map, we explore what factors have influenced you as foster carers, including your own family histories.

### **Can partners attend the Programme together?**

Yes! Partners are more than welcome to attend the Programme together (while the Reflective Fostering Study is ongoing, only the partners of carers who have been randomized into the RFP arm of the study will be eligible to attend the group).

### **Has the Programme been designed with issues of diversity and inclusion in mind?**

The programme is designed for foster carers of children specifically aged 4-13 and so we have not been able to include carers of all ages of children. However, the programme is for foster carers from all backgrounds and many of you will have children from cultures different to your own. The group is run in English so it is not as inclusive as we would like now if you don't speak this language, but we hope that there will be members from different social class groups and ethnic backgrounds will join in the groups as they are much better when there are many different perspectives in the group.

### **How might this improve my relationship with my child in care**

Being a member of a Reflective Fostering Group will help focus your mind on the relationship you have with your foster child when it might often be more focused on your foster child's behaviour (understandably). The programme is devised in a way that helps you to see that the more you are able to mentalize yourself and your foster child, the better the relationship and this will have a positive impact on your child's behaviour for, when emotions are managed better, difficult behaviours reduce.

### **Will this benefit me personally too?**

Reflective Fostering aims to you as a foster carer to look after your own wellbeing and regulate your emotions. In turn, we think this will help to improve the relationship with your foster child and support you to build stronger relationships with your children. Foster Carers in previous groups told us that they really appreciated the focus on their own wellbeing, which in turn helped them to support the child in their care. It might also benefit you in your relationships with significant other people in your life, such as partners, friends and other family members, as mentalizing has the

impact of helping you to feel better connected and better understood, as well as to understand others better.

### **What is the time commitment?**

The Reflective Fostering Programme is delivered over 10, 2.5-hour sessions. It is currently delivered online via Microsoft Teams, but in the future, some groups will return to in-person delivery, where Covid-19 restrictions allow. Sessions start at the beginning of each school term, and run for 11-12 weeks, with a break at half-term. Foster carers who have attended the groups already have often told us that the time goes much quicker than they expected, and they often leave the group with more things they want to discuss.