

SUMMARY: THE REFLECTIVE FOSTERING STUDY



Foster and kinship carers can make a huge difference to children who have had difficult starts in life. Being such a carer can be a really challenging role but, unfortunately, we don't know much about what works best in supporting foster and kinship carers. This study aims to find out, by evaluating the Reflective Fostering Programme.

THE REFLECTIVE FOSTERING PROGRAMME

The Reflective Fostering Programme has been developed by specialists at the Anna Freud Centre. It aims to help foster carers and kinship (or connected) carers in providing the best possible care for the children they look after by improving the quality of carer-child relationships and, therefore, improving the wellbeing of these children.

The programme is aimed at helping carers of children aged 4-13 in developing their care of the children they look after by focusing on their relationships with these children. The Reflective Fostering Programme is a group-based programme which consists of 10 three-hour sessions run by social care staff and experienced carers over a period of up to 12 weeks (with breaks for school holidays). These sessions are ideally delivered in person, but have been adapted successfully for online delivery in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions.

The main aim of the programme is to promote 'reflective fostering'; that is, helping carers to take a reflective stance towards both themselves and their foster child. This stance enables carers to step back from situations and take a different perspective, by reflecting on the internal states of themselves and the child. Studies have suggested that when carers are able to take a reflective stance they build stronger relationships with children they care for, with positive impacts on the wellbeing of these children.

Previous research (Midgley et al., 2021) has indicated that the programme may help carers to feel less stressed and better able to support the children in their care, with promising signs that children's wellbeing also improved.* However, these studies were on a small scale and did not compare the programme with the usual support carers might already receive. Therefore, we do not yet have strong evidence that the Reflective Fostering Programme is more effective than the support carers are usually offered.

"I think it should certainly be rolled out to other foster carers, it should be a mantra basically for foster...well, parents in general but especially foster carers."

Reflective Fostering Programme participant

* Midgley et al. (2021), The reflective fostering programme: evaluating the intervention co-delivered by social work professionals and foster carers, *Journal of Children's Services*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 159-174. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-11-2020-0074>

THE CURRENT STUDY

The aim of the current study is to find out whether offering foster carers and kinship carers the Reflective Fostering Programme, alongside the usual support they already receive, helps to improve the emotional well being of carers and their looked after children aged 4-13. We also want to know whether the programme reduces carer stress and burnout and has an impact on placement stability. We are particularly interested in recruiting carers from minoritised communities, as studies have suggested that these groups are sometimes under-represented in research in children's social care.

The study will compare two randomly selected groups of carers:

1. One group will continue to receive the usual support offered by their local authority;
2. The other will be offered the same support, plus the Reflective Fostering Programme.

Carers that take part in the study will be asked to complete a set of questionnaires at three points of the study: at the beginning of the study, at 4 months, and finally at 12 months after the beginning of the study.

By having two comparison groups, with carers randomly selected to either attend the Reflective Fostering Programme or to continue with the usual support, we will be able to see what difference the programme makes. By collecting this data at 4 and 12 months after the Reflective Fostering Programme/usual support period, we can see whether effects of the programme (if any) are stable and long-term. We will also be speaking in more detail to a small group of carers taking part in the study to understand the changes that may have taken place over this period and their experience of being in the study and attending the programme or receiving usual support.

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

This study hopes:

- to establish the effectiveness of the Reflective Fostering Programme
- to provide more information about what support works best for carers and the children in their care.

We hope that the findings of this study will contribute to helping our understanding of what works to support carers and to improve the well being of the children they care for, helping to ensure carers are provided with the best evidence-based support for their important role. There may also be a benefit to local authorities participating in this study who will have early access to providing this promising intervention and opportunity for complimentary training for staff members who will be delivering the programme. Furthermore, the outcomes of this study will help guide future commissioning decisions for local authorities wishing to invest in evidence-based support for carers in their area.

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