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LASTING RELATIONSHIPS IN FOSTER CARE

RESEARCH FOR PRACTICE SUMMARY

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ENABLING CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE TO STAY CONNECTED WITH THEIR FOSTER FAMILY INTO ADULTHOOD

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FOREWORD

For more than 150 years, Barnardo's has brought care, support and love to some of the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK. Today we are proud to be the largest national children's charity, supporting over 380,000 of those who need us most. We deliver fostering and adoption services across eighteen services across the UK.

Barnardo's Fostering Northern Ireland have been placing children with foster carers for more than forty years. This piece of research with Queens University Belfast gave us the wonderful opportunity to follow up with a range of these care experienced adults and foster carers to discuss the importance of those relationships that last, long into adulthood.

Central to everything we do in fostering is the voice and experience of the children and young people we support and represent, and to listen and learn, as well as working to amplify their views and provide opportunities for them to speak directly to decision makers.

At Barnardo's our goal is clear – to achieve better outcomes for more children and young people and this research simply highlights the core requirements for family cohesion to achieve stronger families and positive futures for all children and young people.

As part of our strategy Barnardo's are committed to learning and will share best practice from this research key messages across our own fostering and adoption services throughout the UK and externally with our partners and Trusts.

The pandemic has demonstrated that we can only ever achieve so much alone, and we will continue to work closely with our partners across the statutory, voluntary and business sectors to help influence systems, so they are fairer, kinder, and better able to meet children's needs.

Brenda Farrell
UK Head of Fostering & Adoption

INTRODUCTION

Enabling young people in foster care to benefit from lasting supportive relationships is a priority — long-term foster care is intended to provide stable, continuous, caring relationships that last throughout childhood into adult life. However, many care leavers have highlighted the challenge of feeling isolated and having to navigate early adulthood without a strong social network[1]. So while continuous relationships with caring adults matter to young people in care and are fundamental to securing better outcomes[2], we need a better understanding of how to achieve this.

The Relationships that Last research project aimed to learn about effective foster care practice from formerly fostered adults who have maintained relationships with their foster family into adulthood. From a critical best practice approach[3], we aimed to identify the active ingredients of these lasting relationships, and what worked well to create the conditions in which they could thrive.

In this brief research for practice report we outline key messages from the research, offer reflective prompts for social workers involved with looked after children or family placements, and make suggestions for foster care practice.

1   HM Government (2016), *Keep on Caring: Supporting Young People from Care to Independence*, London: Her Majesty's Government

2   Boddy, J. (2013) *Understanding permanence for looked after children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*, The Care Inquiry

3   Ferguson, H (2008) The theory and practice of critical best practice in social work, in Jones, K., Cooper, B., Ferguson, H. (eds) *Best Practice in Social Work: Critical Perspectives*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.15-34

KEY MESSAGES

Relationships are at the heart of foster care and should remain a focus of policy and practice. Through different relational journeys and despite numerous challenges, care experienced adults and their foster family maintained mutually valued connections, a strong sense of belonging and explicit commitment to one another.

The first few days and weeks in placement are crucial for establishing connections as a foundation that will enable children and foster carers to stay connected through difficult times. Families should be supported with the time and resources to prepare a welcoming home and get to know the child.

We should pay particular attention to foster parenting in adolescence as this was a time when young people's sense of belonging was challenged and a tension between 'normality' in family life and the procedural requirements of corporate parenting acutely felt. Balancing a growing need for autonomy with age-appropriate 'parental' control is challenging within the context of fostering.

Staying connected is possible even after difficult endings. When placements ended prematurely or in a crisis, relational permanence was achieved through a mutual process of repair and commitment.

Young people made active choices about belonging and family identity. Perceptions of dual connection to birth and foster family differed, but all made conscious decisions about their engagement in and identification with these family networks. Young people's informed choices about family identity should be supported and respected.

A sense of belonging is built and maintained through 'normal' family practices. The often-overlooked day-to-day practices of foster family life were highly significant for enabling security and inclusion and should be celebrated. Some procedural requirements, albeit necessary, felt abnormal, so we should continue to examine how professional practices help or hinder a sense of belonging.

Relationships are reciprocal and embedded in extended foster family networks. Care experienced adults led interdependent lives with mutually supportive relationships across multiple generations of their foster family. Inclusion by relatives and friends should be recognised and supported, and we should value the contribution that young people make to their foster family.

Attachment to the foster family home is important, with ongoing access to the house viewed as both a practical resource and symbolic of continued family membership. When visiting the house was not possible, this loss of 'home' was compensated for with other forms of family inclusion.

Transitions to adulthood are a fluid journey and not a point in time achievement, so foster carers provided informal extended care, offering emotional, practical and financial support, remaining responsive to a range of need long after the placement ended.

Empathy is a crucial ingredient of lasting relationships, but requires insight, patience, and compassion. It is difficult to remain mind-minded when stressed, so supporting for carers' own wellbeing is key.

Throughout this research for practice summary we explore each of these themes in more detail and offer reflective prompts to help embed key messages in practice. In our conclusion we make suggestions for individual-level micro practices and larger scale policy or practice initiatives that might enable relational permanence in foster care.

THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT LAST RESEARCH PROJECT

This project was undertaken by Queens University Belfast in partnership with Barnardos Fostering Northern Ireland (NI), and with a Peer Advisory Group of care experienced adults who were involved in developing the interview format and recruitment materials, and in reviewing the data to identify key messages.

It involved narrative interviews with 12 care-experienced adults and with their former foster carers (n=22) separately and aimed to find out from this group of participants:

1. What their relationships are like now and what they were like growing up.

2. What individual, relational, organisational and structural factors enabled these lasting relationships to develop and be sustained beyond the formal ending of the placement.

3. What key messages might help fostering service providers, foster carers, and care experienced young people to achieve relational permanence in foster care.

The care experienced participants were aged between 18 and 28 years old; had been looked after in a Barnardos Northern Ireland foster care placement up to or beyond their 16th birthday within the past 15 years; and continued to have a relationship with their foster family after the formal ending of the placement. Their former foster carers were interviewed separately.

All participants were asked to relate the story of their foster relationships in their own terms using a visual timeline diagram to help structure their narrative. They were also asked to complete a visual relationship map and discuss the closeness/distance of their relationship with foster carers and other important people, and to recount typical interactions to ascertain the practices that forged and sustained these relationships. A card sorting exercise ascertained the ongoing nature of practical, emotional and guidance support received from foster family or others.

Interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed and input to Maxqda software to help us manage and organise the large volume of data. Analysis involved reading and re-reading each transcript to identify themes in that individual's narrative and then comparing and contrasting themes across participants[4] to identify from these different perspectives the key ingredients that enabled relationships to last.

In a series of online workshops we shared a summary of our findings with: foster care practitioners, managers and policy makers; care experienced members of our peer advisory group; foster carers; and Barnardos staff and managers. This helped us to identify contextual factors that are particular to Northern Ireland and to formulate our conclusions and suggestions for practice.

Approval for the study was given by Office of Research Ethics Committees Northern Ireland (ORECNI) and Barnardos Research Ethics Committee. All participants gave permission for the data from their interviews to be used in a range of presentations and publications. The quotations below are in their own words. To protect their privacy we have changed the names and given each participant a pseudonym.

The following sections summarise key themes from the interviews.

4   Keats, P.A. (2009) Multiple text analysis in narrative research: visual, written, and spoken stories of experience, *Qualitative Research*, 9(2), pp.181-195.

KEY POINTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP JOURNEY

Beginnings – first impressions

First meetings between the child and foster carers, and early days of placement, were clearly very memorable, and associated with strong emotion. That care experienced participants could recall the sensory experience of the start of placement in great detail reflects their heightened state of alertness and the anxiety of the move.

The foster carers talked of instantly seeing something in the child that was likeable, and all spoke fondly of first impressions. Even when the child's behaviour or presentation were not objectively endearing, all foster carers recognised characteristics that they could connect to.

> George said of Alister that most people "just saw him as trouble" but George saw "the mischief in him, and that brought me out of my shell."

Care experienced participants also described instantly liking the foster carers, feeling accepted and having a gut instinct that this placement *'felt right'*. They recalled a genuine warmth and welcome, noting that foster carers prioritised putting them at their ease. During the early days of placement, the physical surroundings were important to care experienced participants who recalled the ways that carers made them feel comfortable, safe and welcomed. Preparation of the actual physical environment communicated an invitation to make the house their home and enabled children to quickly feel an authentic sense of being 'at home' rather than a visitor to someone else's home.

Alison described her first memory of placement:
"I do remember we moved in we had our beds set up in our bedrooms and like these lovely duvet covers like, I can still remember it, mine had dolls on it and I can still picture them, and then like two sets of basic clothes, you know, just all new and laid out for us. Like nothing extravagant but you know, your socks and pants and stuff like that, pyjamas, a pair of slippers... I just felt welcome, you know and I think I felt at home pretty quickly and like I was wanted, you know and... so I guess valued... it was just very thoughtful and it was like, my needs mattered kind of thing."

All of the foster carers described that their first impression was of a child who clearly needed their care and provoked strong feelings of compassion. While they recounted various emotional and behavioural difficulties at the start of placement (nightmares, anxiety, anger, aggression, opposition), their protective urge motivated carers to have the necessary patience to get to know the child's preferences, needs and unique characteristics: *'to sort of find the person'*.

Yvonne: "he looked like he needed care... I remember the feeling 'oh he needs my help'."

Reflections for practice – placement beginnings

For the foster carers and care experienced people in our study, first impressions of one another were very influential and infused with emotion, highlighting how critical first days in placement are for forging lasting relationships.

- How might we factor the importance of liking one another into the matching process?

- How might we emphasise the importance of beginnings in the assessment, approval and matching process? For example, fostering panels might ask about preparation for the child entering the home.

- What language and practices will convey a welcome? For example, explicitly referring to 'your house' or 'your room', and preparation of the space.

Middles – foster parenting teens

Adolescence was a time when care experience participants felt that their fostered status in the family was most emphasised. The procedural requirements of corporate parenting in the teenage years emphasised their fostered status in a way that contradicted their day-to-day lived experience of family belonging. They recalled adolescence, as a point at which the prospect of placement breakdown surfaced as a possibility, and they became more aware of the authority of social services.

Foster carers normalised adolescent boundary testing as *'typical teenage behaviour'*. However, there was a tension between wanting to allow age-appropriate risk-taking but feeling constrained by the rules and processes of foster care. Reporting and safeguarding processes were described abnormal family practices, with young people feeling they were being parented differently to their peers. This emphasised their *'other'* and *'outsider'* status in the foster family in direct contradiction to how they perceived their own place and identity as an integral foster family member.

Some carers demonstrated insight into adolescent needs and priorities and went to great lengths to preserve the young person's sense of normality and social inclusion, while also adhering to requirements.

When they ran out of time to get the necessary checks and approvals for Danielle to attend a sleepover party, Lara ensured that she did not have to miss out on this social opportunity that was so important to her: "She was beside herself and it was really humiliating because she was going to have to tell the girls she couldn't come having told them she was coming (to the party). I just took the decision to drive her to (distant town) and sit outside the party until 2am and then drive her home again... I had been in work all day... but she got to her party and she didn't have to say things (about being fostered)."

Throughout adolescence, foster carers were clearly the primary relationship for care experienced participants. They were able to communicate their wishes and feelings to their foster carers, believed that carers heard and respected their viewpoint, and were confident that carers knew and understood them well. It was also their foster carers who explained care plans, helped them make sense of their circumstances and who give assurances of continuity and commitment. While some had engaged in social work review processes *'to speak for myself'*, relationships with social workers did not feature prominently in their accounts. In this context, pathway planning with social workers from the age of 16years, while understood as necessary, was also experienced as unsettling, especially when participants noted low expectations on the part of social workers that either the placement or that supportive foster relationships would continue into adulthood.

Communication and mutual respect, therefore, were key to maintaining positive foster family relationships throughout adolescent challenges. Participants described how a bedrock of close relationship that had already been forged enabled them to communicate and listen to one another's concerns.

Through discussion Alison, for example, came to appreciate her foster carers keeping procedural requirements as confirmation of their care and commitment: "I was just like frustrated because I just couldn't be like my peers... like I was under a scope basically... I thought she was just touting on me kind of thing, and I would be like 'why do you have to tell them?' but it was just because she wanted to keep us, so it her way of trying to say 'I love you that much that I am going to do this properly'."

Reflections for practice – fostering teens

A key ingredient of these lasting relationships during the teenage years was the ability to understand boundary-testing as normal adolescent behaviour. However, procedural requirements stifled the ebb and flow of family life and challenged young people's sense of belonging and security.

- What social work practices facilitate or undermine a sense of belonging for fostered adolescents?

- How might the process of agreeing delegated authority for foster carers help provide a normal experience of family life to teenagers?

- Can statutory requirements be achieved in ways that recognises and fits with foster family life for teenagers? For example, consider whether it would be more or less intrusive to the young person and family to hold reviews in the foster home rather than an office.

Crisis endings – repairing relationships

For some care experienced participants their foster placement ended before age 18years following a crisis that made it unsustainable. Participants described very difficult incidents of damage to property and threats of aggression or actual aggression. They spoke of a process of reparation that allowed their relationship to be sustained. This was based on empathy and understanding of the root cause of these crises. Foster carers spoke of having to see past the behaviour to the young person inside. While they demonstrated empathy, this did not exist in a vacuum but was scaffolded and enabled through

detailed knowledge of the young person's early adverse history and the support of social workers and Child and Adolescent Mental Health teams who helped them to understand how behaviour was linked to mental health difficulties.

Lucy: **"I think like they someway kind of understood that it wasn't like entirely my fault it was like I was in a bad place I didn't know how else to work through it."**

Foster carers were motivated to repair and sustain the relationship partly in recognition that the young person continued to want and need their support, but also because they had a bond that was important in their own lives – severing the relationship would be a significant loss for themselves and not just for the young person.
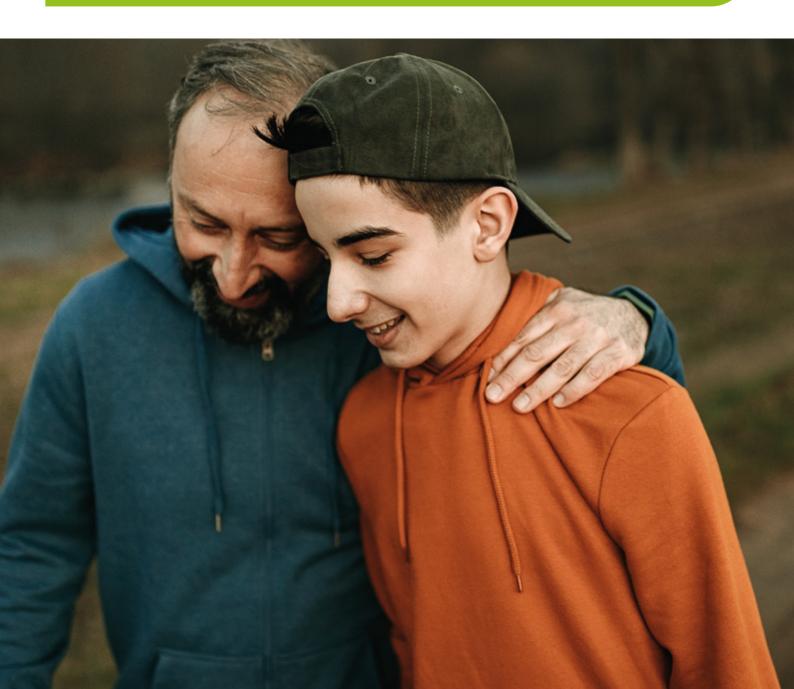
Richard & Nicola: **"We know her, and we love her and we wanted to see her."** (Richard) **"Yes, I mean, we missed her, she was part of our life."** (Nicola).

Carers found it helpful to reflect on how much they and the young person had gained and achieved in the placement together, one couple for example made a photograph album for the young person to celebrate the good times they had shared. For care experienced participants it was important to have an

opportunity to say sorry either verbally or through small gestures that conveyed respect and care – one person for example sent the foster carers 'some dumb art stuff' they had made.

Reflections for practice – crisis endings

Some participants felt that social workers did not appreciate the importance of these relationships, particularly when difficulties arose in the placement. Participants felt that their commitment to continued connection with one another was either overlooked or actively discouraged. After crisis endings, social work support was most helpful when the mutual importance of foster family relationships was acknowledged.

- How can we acknowledge the emotional impact for all involved when placements end early or in a crisis?

- How might endings be recorded in a way that facilitates the young person's understanding of the circumstances and a coherent narrative, now and for the future?

- Might crisis endings be managed in a way that leaves open the option of communication and future relationship?

ACHIEVING A SENSE OF BELONGING

Family identity

Care experienced participants all made active choices about their family identity. For some, their primary identification was with foster family who they referred to as their *'real'* family. Other care experienced participants felt a strong sense of belonging to their foster family, were sure of their place as *'part of the family'*, but their primary identification remained with birth relatives. This view of themselves as belonging to two families was accommodated by their foster carers and did not undermine their sense of security or the permanence of their foster relationships. For both, claiming ownership of their place in the foster family emanated from their experience of everyday care and consistent tangible expressions of love.

Naming practices affirmed the young person's status as either *'real family'* or *'part of the family'*, both in the context of internal family interactions and more publicly to external audiences.

Talking of his foster brother Rory said: **"he (foster brother) would never say 'my mum', he would say 'mum' as in our mum… but when I say to people 'my mum', it's like they won't understand if it's my actual mum or am I talking about Yvonne (foster carer) I think that confuses people."**

While most referred to foster carers as mum and dad, and were referred to as sons and daughters, this was not exclusively the case. Using these kinship labels was not crucial for achieving a sense of belonging and the foster family relationships could accommodate a range of types of belonging.

For some their family identity was at odds with their formal status. They spoke of identity as a legal category, of which names are a key signifier, and the predominance of birth names and birth connections when negotiating with formal agencies. Some described ways that they circumvented the absence of legal foster family connection through formal mechanisms, for example one person assumed their foster surname via deed poll, or via social conventions commonly reserved for those related as kin.

George described the social markers belonging to Alison as kin: "I get called grandad… I gave her away at her wedding." He compared this to how staff in a supported living facility perceived his relationship with an adult foster son: "I am nothing to him in their eyes… with the social workers, the care workers (his sister) is next of kin, I have nothing to do with him legally."

Reflections for Practice – Family identity

Care experienced participants and foster carers all made active choices about identifying as a family together.

- How can we empower young people to make informed choices about foster and birth family belonging?

- How can we support the choices that young people make about family identity? For example, could we enable young people to be known by their foster family surname if they so choose?

Birth family relationships

Decisions about family identification were mostly made in reference to experiences with birth family. Some care experienced participants had minimal contact from early childhood and perceived birth relatives as more distant or not meeting their expectations of how family members relate. Most however, had maintained regular meetings with birth relatives, facilitated by social workers and foster carers. While recognised as important, this contact was often emotionally challenging and unsettling. The subjective day-to-day reality of normal family life was challenged during visits with birth relatives. For care experienced participants, their membership of their foster family felt authentic and real most of the time, but during contact visits the validity of this status was challenged, serving as a reminder that their experiential reality of foster family belonging was not how others saw the situation.

Alison said of contact visits: "I think it was just a reminder that actually the people who I saw as my family, weren't technically my family, so there was a lot of conflict emotionally there because I felt like they were my family. So it is like, life would just go by perfectly, like normal family life, and then you would just get this big glaring reminder that actually you are a bit weird, and you have got a different circumstance."

Some care experienced participants reached a turning point in adolescence when they could take more control to either draw closer to, or create distance from their birth family.

Hannah described her decision to belong with her foster family as a choice to invest in relationships that felt best for herself emotionally: "(my mum) started not coming to see me and didn't show much appreciation because she didn't really talk to me at contact so then I just made up my mind that I was put with a lovely caring family and that I didn't have that with my real family, it didn't feel like they really cared about me that much, or they didn't love me that much, and I didn't want to like go back and live with my family I wanted to be with a family that loved me and cared for me and like made me feel safe."

Foster carers encouraged birth relationships throughout childhood motivated by a belief in their fundamental importance for the young person's identity. Some carers and birth relatives forged an easy, if occasional, and adult-to-adult relationship via their shared connection with the young person and based on mutual respect. Foster carers could accept the role of birth relatives in the young person's life without feeling that their own significance was diminished. However, they also understood the complexities of these relationships, and were empathic to the young person's conflicted or ambivalent feelings about birth connections. They worked hard to help sustain relationships by resolving tensions with birth relatives, encouraging young people to have an empathic understanding of their circumstances, and demonstrating a civil and inclusive attitude to their own interactions with birth family.

Rebecca explained why she encouraged Austin to maintain contact with his grandmother: "we always just said that it's your grandmother, you need to go and see your family. It would have been quite easy to turn around and say she is a real nasty this, that or the other... their family is a part of them, a part of who they are. People are not all bad, it's not black and white, she loved him deeply and you could see that, he could see that too."

However, foster carers also emphasised the importance of respecting the young person's

autonomy and choice in birth relationships and sought to equip them with the insight and confidence to make informed choices as they got older.

Inclusion in foster family life

A sense of belonging between young people and foster family was established in the course of living 'ordinary' family life together: seemingly small unremarkable or mundane family practices were in fact highly significant. Caregiving routines that were predictable and consistent enabled a sense of security and built trust in the relationships.

Ciaron said: **"The dinner was always on the table at the same time... there was always a routine. Everything was perfect on the dot. Then the fishing, there was always something to do. And then there was the church. I liked going to church."**

In terms of family caregiving, it was significant to care experienced participants that they were treated *'no differently',* or just the same as, foster carers birth children. Indicators of parity and of being *'treated like one of their own'* included: having the same age-related rights-of-passage; inclusion in family holidays and celebrations; equal value of presents received at Christmas; freedom to tease and be teased or even bicker. Foster carers described this equitable approach to all children in their home as part of their *'rule'* for fostering that they consciously reinforced.

For Laura parity with foster siblings meant having the same opportunities but also the same degree of choice: "I was kind of allowed to make my own decisions like everybody else was in the house. For example, like, maybe if I wanted to drive, I would have been given the same opportunities as everybody else."

Yvonne said: "just treat them like your own, and sometimes that was hard, but that was my motto".

Care experienced participants enjoyed foster family celebrations and to have foster relatives join them for their own important rights-of-passage and life celebrations. Christmas celebrations and 18th birthday parties were described as a highlight by most participants, and there was great joy at being included in family weddings.

Austin's description of family celebrations was typical: "the high days were like you know, you're going on your holiday or you get a good score on your on your test and you get taken out for dinner, you know birthday parties, Christmas gathering, you know where the whole family would come together and just relax and spend time together... all the cousins would have came down, all the aunts, and like literally the whole family would have come down at Christmas."

Inclusion in longstanding foster family traditions brought a reassuring sense of longevity and helped young people locate their place in the wider foster family. Shared memories and family stories provide a strong emotive connection that anchored care experienced adults to the extended foster family.

Rory described frequent holidays at the family caravan were an anchor point of his childhood and meant inclusion in traditions that predated him and have continued into his adulthood: "everything that she would have done years before I was born, she brought me up doing the same thing, so it was always a tradition… my whole life is just built around memories with them."

Crucially, many of these normal family practices continued long after the young person left the foster family home or the ending of placement.

Reflections for practice – inclusion in family life

Mundane family routines were highly significant for establishing a sense of belonging or security but often go unnoticed. The seemingly small things were in fact the big important things.

- How can we make visible the value of day-to-day foster care-giving?

Sense of belonging to an extended foster family

When foster carers' friends and relatives included care experienced participants in activities this enabled them to feel *"like I am their family"*. Memorable celebrations as well as more mundane routines, for example, popping into a foster grandparent's house for a snack on the way home from school, brought fun, a sense of inclusion and a stock of fond memories.

Yvonne described her parents' active inclusion of Rory, investing time and interest in helping him to thrive: "my father taught him how to play football and how to use a hurley stick, my daddy would have done all of that you know… and many of my friends really invested in him… when I fostered, they fostered… They just opened… their door was open."

Most of the care experienced participants were several years younger than their foster siblings. They described these relationships as having brought a sense of normality throughout their childhood. Foster siblings were very influential in promoting a sense of family belonging, and care experienced participants

described being closer to their foster siblings than to *'actual family'*. They appreciated how sibling squabbles or small rivalries allowed them to feel part of a normal family, while foster carers' older or adult children became role models and participated actively in care routines.

Laura talked about how her older foster siblings enjoyed having a baby in the family **"I never really fought with them cos I was the baby so they just… loved me. Still do…. I needed a lot of attention I guess. But they liked playing with me and doing stuff with me."**

Sometimes responses from extended family could also undermine a sense of belonging to the wider foster family. When foster children were treated differently from birth children this was felt acutely by both care experienced participants and foster carers. These experiences surfaced at times when the placement was under strain and relatives looked to prioritise the wellbeing of the foster carers and their birth children. Safeguarding processes also inhibited some spontaneous opportunities for inclusion such as trips away with foster relatives.

Amanda said: "we had occasions where people had arrived with stuff, little gifts and missed Jason and were really, really upset and said, 'I don't know why, I didn't even think of him'. That's the whole point, they didn't even think of him… we made sure we intervened and said, 'don't give anything until you can give all.'"

Belonging to *'home'*

Care experienced participants had a strong sense of belonging in and attachment to the foster carer's house, which they thought of as their own home. They described how, from the outset of placement, they were invited to make the house their own home. Feeling at home in the foster carer's house was linked with a sense of being included as a member of the family. After leaving care, many continued using the foster family home, or retained a place there, coming and going freely, or keeping the décor of their bedroom. This entitlement was an affirmation of their ongoing status as part of the foster family. 'Home' was a roof over your head, and a place to store your stuff but also represented a place to belong emotionally.

Ciaron's attachment to the foster home was literally cemented into the fabric of the house and the enduring nature of this building work was linked to the enduring nature of the relationship: "Like if you go round to the front of the house there is things there, that will be there until that house is falling down… like that tarmac at the front, the kerb stones around the edge, me and Fred put them down".

Hannah linked the support and care she received from her foster family to her sense of having a home: "they gave me a place that I could actually call my own home and a family that loved me and cared for me… Norma had reassured me that I could stay with them as long as I want and even if I got my own place the back door or the front door will always be open and I could just walk on in no matter what time of the day it is I could just see them whenever."

The option to return to visit or stay at the foster family home was not available to all care experienced adults. Access to the home was contingent on risk assessments which led to restrictions on visiting being imposed on some care experienced participants who had previously presented with aggressive or challenging behaviour, particularly if there were younger foster children still in placement.

RELATIONAL PERMANENCE – FOSTER RELATIONSHIPS IN ADULTHOOD

Flexible transitions

When it came time to leave care at age 18 or older, young people felt excitement but also some trepidation. This was echoed by foster carers who recognised the importance of moving, but sometimes queried the young person's readiness. A key ingredient of lasting relationships at this stage was that the move out of care was not necessarily expected to be straightforward or definitive, but there was flexibility in how adult transitions were approached.

Some made trial moves to independence, leaving then moving back into the foster family home, and having the option to get it wrong, come home and then try again. In this way leaving care was a developmental process rather than a one-off point in time event.

> Amanda: **"He tried to go and live independently and he's back again, cos it didn't work out... it was just 'get him home and get him sorted'."**

Danielle initially moved out to live closer to her birth family. She described this period as a time of turbulence during which the option to return to her foster family home remained open to her: "I broke up with my boyfriend and quit my job... I dyed my hair red. I don't know what was wrong with me... I thought being near my family would be better, and I moved to (town). Got there and I was like, why am I here?... As much as I love my family, we couldn't live with each other, so I came back up here... I like living with Michael and Lara (foster carers)."

For many, the foster family home was an ongoing resource into adulthood, a place to go back to when wanted or needed, providing a sense of place but also allowing for fluid more gentle transitions out of care. As noted above, some care experienced participants did not have this option access to the foster family home because of risk to younger foster or grandchildren. While these participants experienced a more complex range of challenges in adulthood, they did not have the safety net of returning to the foster home.

Foster carers continued to feel protective toward formerly fostered adults, mostly related to concerns about their mental and emotional wellbeing, or perceived relationship vulnerability. While care experienced adults mainly welcomed this ongoing protective support, they and their foster family had

to negotiate the boundaries of what was appropriate protection in adulthood.

Lara's description illustrates the boundary tensions associated with Danielle still needing a safe base, but also exercising autonomy in her relationships: "all you can really do is say, 'please try and keep yourself safe, stay with your friends, be sensible'. I have said to her, 'if you ever need me to come and get you I will', but there has been a couple of times that's been tested at 3 in the morning."

In some instances, financial help was needed well into adulthood, either repeatedly over time to help manage debt or poor budgeting, or as a one-off response to a financial emergency, often because of benefit entitlements not being claimed due to lack guidance.

Foster carers acknowledged that after placements ended, they were not expected to provide financial support as part of their fostering role, but offered monetary assistance from their perceived status as family, and from their own pocket – a form of support that is expected of a parent.

Amanda described offering financial help to Jason as part of "our role as normal parents" and similar to the support her birth children expected from her in early adulthood: "It even more so fitted into how he was with our own children, which is basically when he run out of money, he was in trouble, we were the first point of call. You know they'd barely meet you for a cup of coffee, but that's exactly what my other children were like at that age."

The potential financial strain for carers could create tension and some conflict in the relationship. Foster carers, therefore, appreciated it when care experienced adults gave some gesture of gratitude or made efforts to manage own finances.

Danielle said: "the family group chat, little stupid things like that makes you feel more included."

Reflections for practice – flexible transitions

Foster carers offered a range of responsive support well into adulthood. Care experienced adults with the most complex needs had least options for flexible transitions. Across the UK extended care schemes offer financial support for young people to stay in their foster home post 18 years of age. However, the foster carers in this study offered ongoing financial support long after eligibility for formal allowances ceased, as indeed many parents would.

- How might the foster care resource be best utilised to offer flexible transitions to those care experienced adults who need it?
- Might agency finances be utilised to create a contingency or emergency fund for carers to dip into for care leavers when needed?

Foster family practices in adulthood

Participants described the practices that characterised and sustained their relationships in adulthood. Most checked in with one another regularly by phone – for some this was daily or for most weekly. Foster carers acted as a communication hub for care experienced adults to stay in touch with foster siblings and wider foster family.

Staying in touch was not just about need or support but also centred on common interests. Sharing funny YouTube videos or even just 'liking' one another's posts on social media helped them feel more connected.

In the context of busy adult lives participants also prioritised making time to relax together and enjoy one another's company through a shared activity – usually watching the same TV show, either together or from their separate homes, which provided a focal point for conversation. Participants described a lightness in their foster family interactions and having a laugh or joining in pleasant activities together seemed central to being part of the family in adulthood.

Foster carers continued to offer practical help, mainly help with securing appropriate housing, household maintenance and attending important medical or housing appointments.

> Alison gave an example of what she said was a normal adult relationship with George giving plumbing instructions over the phone: **"I lost my wedding ring down the sink, and I phoned him in a panic like, 'is it lost?' and he was like 'no, unscrew this bit, unscrew that bit and there you go'."**

As care experienced adults built their own households and families, their place in the foster family was expanded to include romantic partners. Foster carers modelled acceptance and positive relationships throughout the placement and care experienced participants now wanted their partners to be included in this supportive family network. Partners were often brought to the foster home for Sunday dinner or Christmas and foster carers forged relationships with partners' parents as future 'in-laws'.

Claudia described the first meeting between her foster carers and her partner (after leaving care): "Dad told an embarrassing joke and I was going, Dad no! my Dad was just talking for ages and so was my Mum and his Mum... they love him, and his parents love me."

A key ingredient in reciprocal adult relationships was a sense of family obligation. This was particularly expressed in terms of care experienced participants caring for older or younger foster relatives. Contributing, being helpful and feeling needed were seen as part and parcel of being a family. Mutually giving and receiving support also provided a framework of routine around which families could readily spend time together.

Yvonne described how Rory helped care for her mother: "he had a great relationship with my mother... if she rang me and said 'the television has gone off' .... I would say 'Rory, she has hit the wrong buttons, could you go up?'.... and he would go up. And 'Granny, you have done it again. Look you are not supposed to touch those buttons'... and whatever. He did it with good grace. He did it naturally."

In adulthood most care experienced participants had maintained mutually beneficial relationships with foster siblings. Many had acted as bridesmaids or ushers at weddings, played an active role as aunt or uncle to foster siblings' children, and kept in touch independently, often confiding in one another.

Rory described his foster brother valuing their communication: "he was talking about how he wanted to go and meet his dad for the first time... he is opening up to me... we are at that stage now."

Care experienced participants often turned to older foster siblings, rather than foster carers, for support and guidance or practical help.

Reflections for practice – foster families in adulthood

Participants had negotiated routines for keeping in touch and staying involved in one another's family practices into adulthood. A key ingredient in adulthood involved taking an interest in and contributing to the wellbeing of older and younger foster family members, even in small ways.

- How can we support foster carers and young people who want to stay in contact after leaving care? For example, helping them to express their preferences and expectation and come to an agreement about the best way of keeping in touch.

- What messages can we give young people about the role of reciprocity in relationships?

- How can we let young people know that their contributions to their foster family are valuable?

THE EMOTIONAL QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

As participants described their relationships characterised by tenacity, reciprocity, mutual respect and an openness to loving and being loved. These were two-way relationships mutually constructed with young people as active agents. While the forms of giving and taking varied between foster carers and care experienced adults, it was important that both recognised the other's commitment. Appreciation of one another was often displayed in small gestures that were recognised and treasured as tokens of affection.

Ursula (foster carer) treasured a thank-you card from Martha that she felt acknowledged the significance of their connection: "I still have the card and it said, thank you very much... I mean getting that card when she turned 18 was like a life changer... it was the first time she had called us mummy and daddy, and just thanked us for bringing her up, thanked us for the party... it made us both cry."

As they spoke of one another it was clear that participants accepted and appreciated one another for the people they are with all their admirable and annoying character traits. They identified likeable qualities in each other that they enjoyed and connected with and could point out perceived weaknesses in the other without fear of causing offence.

Participants used the word 'love' as an essential feature of their relationship and were explicit about the fact that they loved one another and felt loved in return. This was offered as a simple explanation for the longevity of their connection and confidence for the future.

Hannah freely expressed her love for her foster carers with gifts and tokens and felt validated when these were displayed in 'special' places in their home: "I buy them stuff like a wee teddy bear saying 'I love you' then there's times when I have made gifts to show that as well.. they've still got them all put in like a special place in the house. They have a teddy that sits in their room on their wardrobe, or there's gifts I've bought for them downstairs, so they have them all out downstairs and all."

They acknowledged however that love was not necessarily commonly expected of foster relationships and referred to sensitivities about using this language.

When Lucy's birth mother thanked him for their continued support, Richard said: "I just said 'well, we love her'... I didn't know whether that was the right thing to say, but it was the truth."

Care experienced participants and foster carers emphasised the importance of sticking with one another even in difficult times. Many had been tenacious in sustaining their relationship in the face of some very difficult challenges, forging trust in the process.

For foster carers, empathy was crucial for sustaining the relationship in the face of behaviour that tested their parenting capacity. This was supported by Child and Adolescent Mental Health teams who helped carers understand how behaviour emanated from a legacy of trauma or early adversity, and by supervising social workers who helped them adapt their parenting style and accept much needed respite.
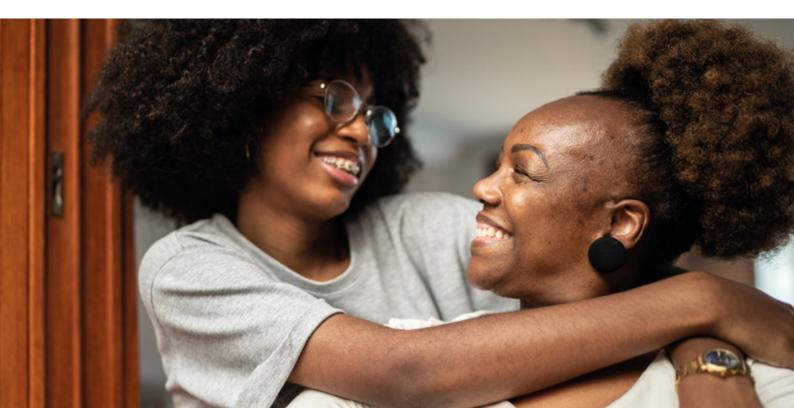
Amanda described this: "we were really struggling with this behaviour because it was so hard to deal with, because it was every single day… you're being very cautious, it was a foster child and there was these all kind of safeguarding things… we were getting stories about keep your distance, be safe, you know… it wouldn't be natural, in a normal, natural family that you're kind of conscious all the time… of being professionals in your home and we were going, No, no we're not, we're Mum and Dad in our home and we're family in our home… They were teaching us that behaviours meant something. It would be very hard if you didn't make that connection, but I'd made that connection so I was seeing what was it about, what was he trying to tell me."

Tenacity in sustaining sometimes difficult relationships was also driven by foster carers' own role identity. Their fundamental expectation of foster care was as a long-term commitment to the placement and a life-long commitment to the individual child, even if they ever had to use the 'safety valve' of ending the placement.

Amanda: "we were always saying if we ever committed to foster care, it would be 100% commitment, cause you're dealing with human beings, and we'd have to push ourselves past… and we did have to push ourselves past anything that we'd ever know before."

Reflections for practice – the emotional quality of relationships

In challenging times foster carers were able to tenaciously persist in caring for the young person because they were motivated by compassion. They also had a clear fostering mission that anchored them to the relationship.

- In recruitment and assessment of new carers, how might we identify or encourage compassion?

- How might we help foster carers articulate their role identity and reflect on the mission they set for themselves at the outset?

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The participants in the Relationships that Last study weathered often turbulent relationship trajectories to sustain mutually valued connections and a strong sense of belonging to one another. These findings confirm that relationships are at the heart of fostering and should remain the focus of our policy and practice.

Throughout this summary we have offered reflective prompts and questions that might help stimulate creative individual-level micro practices or larger scale policy and practice initiatives. Here we conclude with recommendations arising from our key findings.

Taking an overview of the themes from the research interviews, there are four key aspects of policy and practice that can enable relational permanence in foster care – many of these will already be embedded in fostering practice, others we hope will encourage ongoing service development:

The importance of beginnings

First impressions of one another were very influential, highlighting how critical first days in placement are for establishing connections that will enable children and foster carers to stay connected through difficult times to forge lasting relationships.

It is important that:

- Training for foster carers includes insights into the experience of joining a new family from a child's point of view.

- Carers are afforded time and resources to prepare a welcoming home environment and space to get to know the child.

- Children and foster carers are each given safe space in which to express their initial impressions of one another.

Foster parenting in adolescence

Adolescence was a time when young people's sense of belonging and security was most challenged, highlighting the need to pay particular attention to foster parenting teens, especially managing the balance between increasing autonomy and ongoing 'parental' control in the context of corporate parenting.

It is important that:

- Children's social workers prioritise establishing the parameters of foster carer's delegated authority and keep this under review to remain flexibly responsive to children's developmental needs.

- Particular care and attention is given to foster parenting for teenagers – especially to how carers can be equipped to the balance the young person's need for increasing autonomy with ongoing 'parental' control.

- Training for foster carers continues to prioritise adolescent development and the impact of early adversity or trauma on developmental trajectories.

Staying connected after difficult endings

When placements ended prematurely or in a crisis, meaningful lasting relationships could still be sustained. Social work support was most helpful when the mutual importance of foster family relationships was acknowledged.

It is important that:

- The possibility of maintaining contact and connection between the young person and their foster family is considered and assessed in all transitions – even following crisis placement endings. If face-to-face contact is not appropriate initially, other forms of contact such as cards, texts, telephone calls or social media could be encouraged.

- The Fostering Network has published Keep Connected principles to enable young people to keep in touch with significant individuals. Consideration should be given to embedding these principles into policy and practice in relation to placement endings: **https://www. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/default/ files/2021-03/keepconnectedprinciples_0.pdf**

Forging a sense of belonging through 'normal' family practices

A sense of belonging was established in the course of consistent, routine care-giving and the mundane practices of family life – in this regard the small things of day-to-day life were in fact the big things that enabled security and inclusion. Sense of belonging could be undermined by regulation and procedural requirements that felt abnormal in the context of family life. Within the context of necessary regulation, it is important to consider in what ways professional practices help or hinder a sense of belonging to foster family. Young people and foster carers also made active choices about their family identity. Young people should be empowered to make informed choices about belonging and family relationships and their choices should be respected.

For young people's sense of identity it is important that:

- We recognise that relational permanence is not necessarily contingent on legal permanence. Some young people can have a strong sense of belonging to both foster and birth family and this dual connection should be accommodated.

- Young people's informed choices about their family identity are respected and supported.

- Consideration is given to implementing policy initiatives that strengthen the status of permanent foster placement, for example aligning Northern Ireland procedures with English regulations in this regard.

- Foster carers are supported to understand the complexities of young people's birth family relationships and to reflect on their own role identity, and the young person's place within the foster family.

For a sense of belonging it is important that:

- Foster carers are encouraged to welcome foster children into their world, while respecting and facilitating the child's own unique culture and traditions.

- Planning for placement ending facilitates young people and foster carers to discuss expectations about and strategies for staying connected.

For engagement with extended foster family it is important that:

- Assessments help foster carers to identify the potential sources of support and challenge within their extended networks.

- Awareness-raising training is offered routinely to the friends and family of new foster carers.

- The significance of lasting relationships with foster grandparents, foster siblings and foster nieces and nephews is recognised and acknowledged.

For attachment to 'home' it is important that:

- Planning for a move into placement takes account of the child's sensory experience of the home environment.

- Foster carers are supported to prepare their home to help ensure the child feels welcomed and comfortable.

- Some care leavers do not have the option to return to or visit foster homes to which they felt attached, particularly if their behaviour had the potential to be negative or harmful to younger children. It is important that this loss of home is acknowledged and, where possible, compensated for with other forms of family inclusion.

Fluid transitions

The transition to adulthood and more independent living was a journey and not a point in time achievement. Foster carers continued to offer a flexible responsive source of support long after the placement ended. The prospect of being called on as a source of financial assistance might create a barrier to ongoing relationship between foster carers and young people leaving their care. Access to a flexible source of external financial support into adulthood might enable closer social and emotional engagement from foster family for some care leavers. Care experienced participants lived interdependent lives that included multiple generations of their foster family, and felt this mirrored the experience of non-care experienced peers.

It is important that:

- We take care when using the term 'independence' as a goal for care leavers and aim also for 'interdependence'. This will require careful assessment and planning to ensure that social networks of mutual support are in place and can be sustained.

- We consider carefully what a more fluid approach to adult transitions might mean for extended care policy and practice.

Enabling empathy

A crucial ingredient of these lasting relationships was empathy, which in turn was enabled through education on the impact of trauma, support for carers' own wellbeing, and a compassionate mindset. Remaining empathic requires time, patience and support, especially when young people have emotional difficulties and challenging behaviour. It is difficult for carers to remain mind-minded when they are busy and under stress.

It is important that:

- Psychological support and education for foster carers is prioritised to help them understand the impact of early adverse experiences and offer trauma-informed care.

- Social workers have access to training to understand the potential impact of caring for a child who has experienced trauma, are able to identify indicators of compassion fatigue in foster carers, and know where they can access support.

ENABLING CARE EXPERIENCE
CONNECTED WITH THEIR FOST

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**D YOUNG PEOPLE TO STAY
TER FAMILY INTO ADULTHOOD**

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