

LORIMER FOSTERING

at the heart of Fostering

Foster Carers' Roles & Responsibilities

Level 1a · Course Handbook · LF2522

Stage 1 Induction Learning · Course 1

About this course

This handbook introduces the role of a foster carer - what fostering is and why it matters, how foster carers work as part of a team, and how children grow, develop and recover. It is the first course in your Stage 1 induction learning.

What this handbook covers

- what foster care is, and the difference it makes to children
- how children come into care, and who foster carers are
- working with children's families and the team around the child
- child development, attachment and the effect of early experiences

Time to read

Microsoft estimates this handbook takes about 17 minutes to read for the 'average' reader. We suggest allowing about an hour, so you have time to pause, reflect and make notes. Some people will take longer and some shorter - that is fine.

This handbook complements our live training - it does not replace it, and attending the live course does not replace reading this handbook. See our Learning & Development policies and your Personal Development Plan (PDP) for timescales, and contact your supervising social worker or manager if you would like any support.

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Introduction. It is important for you to know as much as possible about the role of foster carers, so that you can be sure that fostering is right for you and your family. This handbook introduces the key themes you will meet throughout your fostering career.

1. What is foster care?

Fostering is looking after a child in a family setting and caring for them while their own parents are unable to do so. Foster care provides a safe, secure and stable environment for children, helping them to develop and succeed. It can last from a few hours to many years, depending on the needs of each individual child.

2. An important and valued source of care

Around four in five children who are looked after away from home live in foster care. Research shows that many children in foster care are positive about the care they receive. In one study (Farmer et al, 2007), 85% of children ticked a happy face to show how they felt about living with their foster family.

4 in 5

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE



Around four in five children looked after away from home live in foster care.

Foster care is the main source of care for children looked after away from home.

Children say they like their foster carers and appreciate being loved and treated as one of the family:

“The family is really loving and caring. They make me feel a part of the family.”

“Foster carers have treated us with respect, and we love them. I NEVER WANT TO GO!”

Asked to name the top three things about being in foster care, children said (Who Cares? Scotland, 2012): ‘happy family’, ‘stable home’, ‘feel really cared for’, ‘got more freedom’, ‘good food’, ‘brought up like a child and treated fairly’, and ‘having a safe home, living with a lovely stable family - being loved’.

3. The core principles and values of foster care

In general, foster care is about ensuring that:

- the **child’s welfare is paramount**
- children are supported to develop their talents and skills so they can grow into successful adults
- children’s wishes and feelings are listened to, and
- every child is treated as an individual with unique needs.

4. Like being a parent, but not the same

“All you are offering any child is a normal family with two parents that love each other and children that are prepared to share their home with them... a lot of the time children were not living in normal situations and experiencing what it is like to be in just a normal family.”

Foster carer - Schofield et al, 2012

Fostering is like being a parent, but not the same as being a parent. Foster carers do not replace a child’s birth parents, but they do need to offer good parenting in many of the caring roles they have, for infants through to adolescents. Part of the challenge is to help children understand the different roles and relationships they have in their foster family and in their birth family.

Unlike most parents, foster carers must also be able to cope with children’s reactions to separation, loss, upheaval and sometimes abuse and neglect. It is demanding, but it is also very rewarding to see children respond to your care and settle, thrive, achieve and enjoy their lives.

5. Different types of foster care

There are many different types of foster care to meet children’s and families’ different needs. Some children need long-term fostering; others need only a short-term placement while a family crisis is resolved. Sometimes it is not possible to know at the start how long a child will need to stay.

Respite care (sometimes called short breaks or support care) is another type: a child has a short, planned stay with a foster carer - perhaps a weekend or a week - to give their parents or their main foster carers a break and to give the child a positive experience. It may be a regular arrangement or an occasional one.

You will think about the age groups and types of children you would prefer, or feel best able, to foster. The skills used with young children are not the same as those needed with teenagers, and place different demands on the whole family.

JARGON BUSTER

We use the term ‘child’ to mean anyone under 18. When we mean over-12s specifically, we may use ‘young person’ instead.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Fostering means caring for a child in your own family home while their parents cannot.
- ✓ It can last from a few days to many years, depending on the child's needs.
- ✓ The child's welfare is always the top priority.
- ✓ It is like parenting, but not the same - you are part of a team.

6. The journey into foster care

Why do children become looked after?

Children usually come into foster care because of a number of complex, inter-related factors that compromise their safety or mean their parents cannot care for them properly. These can include:

- abuse or neglect
- parents' drug or alcohol misuse
- parents' mental health issues or medical illness
- conflicts within the family, including domestic abuse
- parents struggling to cope with their child's behaviour, illness, learning disability or physical disability.

These are serious challenges even one at a time; for some families they come in clusters. Many families cope without a social worker, but not all parents have someone to turn to. A child can become looked after at any age.

How do children become looked after?

There are two main routes into care under the **Children Act 1989**. (The law is more complex than this, but this gives you a starting point.)

1. **Voluntarily** (section 20) - those with parental responsibility consent to a public authority accommodating their child. These children are described as 'accommodated', and parents keep all parental responsibility.
2. **Compulsorily** (a care order under section 31) - a court places a child in the care of the local authority because the child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. These children are 'in care', and parental responsibility is shared with the local authority.

Two routes into foster care

under the Children Act 1989

s20

VOLUNTARY

Section 20

- Parents agree to their child being looked after
- The child is 'accommodated'
- Parents keep parental responsibility

s31

COMPULSORY

Section 31 - care order

- A court decides the child needs protection
- The child is 'in care'
- Parental responsibility is shared with the local authority

The two routes into foster care under the Children Act 1989.

7. Who are foster carers?

There is no 'typical' foster carer - each fostering household is unique and valuable. Foster carers are at different stages of family life and come from all ethnicities, cultures and religions. They can be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or straight, single or in a relationship. Some continue in other jobs; others foster full time.

Everyone brings relevant skills from other parts of their life. The assessment identifies the skills people already have and those they need support to develop. This variety is one of the strengths of foster care.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Children become looked after for complex reasons, most often abuse or neglect.
- ✓ There are two routes into care: voluntary (section 20) and compulsory (a section 31 care order).
- ✓ There is no 'typical' foster carer - households are diverse and each one is valued.
- ✓ Everyone brings useful skills, and the assessment builds on the strengths you already have.

8. How foster carers work

As part of the team around the child

The state acts as a corporate parent for children in public care, so a range of services and organisations - including independent fostering providers like Lorimer Fostering - work together to meet a child's needs. Looking after a child in foster care calls for teamwork; you are not expected to work alone, and it is right to ask for the help and support you need. The people involved with a child and their birth family are often called the team around the child, and you will work with them regularly.

With the families of fostered children

Working with children's families is a central part of fostering. Children tell us they want to keep links with their birth family (Wilson et al, 2004). You will support children in belonging to more than one family, and help them keep in touch where it is in their best interests. This is called **family time** (previously known as 'contact'), and it is an important part of the role. Please see our family time policy for how this works in practice.

With your own family and support networks

Fostering involves the whole household. Your family's lifestyle will change, and any sons or daughters living at home are invited to take part in Preparation for Fostering training so they are ready for that change. Fostering can be hard work and emotionally demanding, so a strong support network of friends and family - and taking time to look after yourself - is essential. Learning and development helps too.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Who is in your own support network? Think about who you could call on when fostering feels demanding.

9. Paperwork with a purpose

Like any other job, fostering involves keeping accurate, up-to-date records about the children you look after and their progress, so that information passes between everyone caring for the child and they receive the care they need. Four documents matter most:

- **Assessment** - a thorough assessment of everyone in the household, so Lorimer Fostering can be sure children will be safe and well cared for, and to match children with the carers best placed to help them.
- **Foster care agreement** - signed at approval, setting out any conditions (such as the number, age or gender of children), and how you are supervised, supported and reviewed.
- **Care plan** - the child's key working document, setting out their needs and how these will be met, drawn up by the child's social worker with the team around the child.

- **Placement plan** - agreed whenever a child is placed: the reasons, roles, responsibilities, family-time arrangements, and any delegated authority (the day-to-day decisions delegated to you).

10. Learning and development

All professionals need training. Lorimer Fostering has a duty to provide it, and all foster carers are expected to take up learning and development. In your first year you will complete the **Training, Support and Development (TSD) Standards** for foster carers, and you will continue with ongoing courses, distance learning and work-based qualifications throughout your career. Your PDP sets out what is due and by when.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ Fostering is teamwork - you work with the team around the child, not alone.
- ✓ Family time (previously 'contact') keeps children connected to their birth family.
- ✓ Fostering involves your whole household and a strong support network.
- ✓ Keep clear, accurate records, and complete the TSD Standards in your first year.

11. Listening to children

At the heart of good, stable foster care is the relationship between you and the child. Through it you help a child develop physically, emotionally and socially, learn to trust and communicate, build on their strengths, and understand their own identity. A key message from research is the importance of listening to children's wishes and feelings (Sinclair, 2005) - which also helps keep them safe.

The Care Inquiry (2013) found children value people who:

- are always there for them
- love, accept and respect them for who they are
- are ambitious for them and help them succeed
- stick with them through thick and thin
- are willing to go the extra mile, and
- treat them as part of the family, beyond childhood and into adulthood.

Above all, children want to be involved in decisions about their own lives. As a foster carer you are in a privileged position to build a warm, nurturing relationship that helps children express their wishes and feelings.

12. Creating an 'ordinary' family life

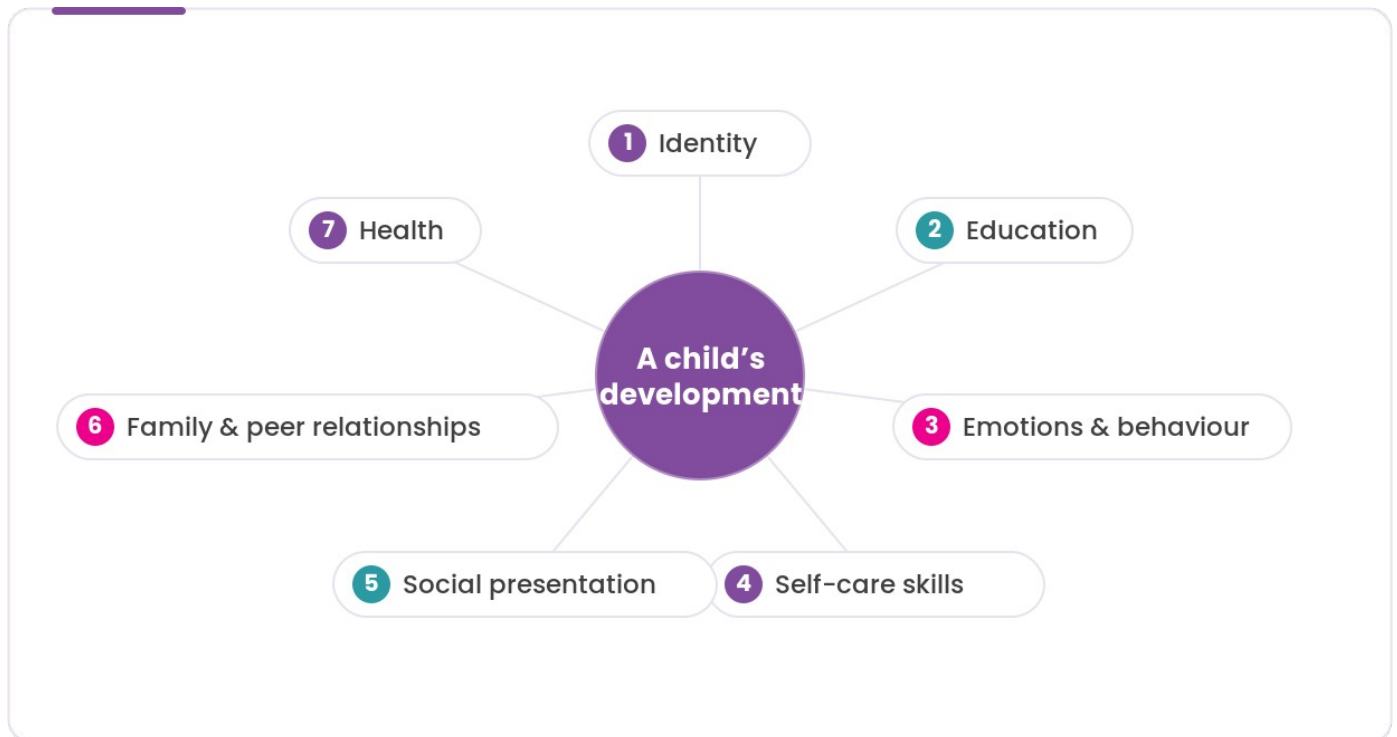
Children tell us they want an 'ordinary' family life and not to be treated as different - in particular, to be treated the same as foster carers' own children. They want the same opportunities as their peers: to go to sleepovers, have their hair styled, have a social media account or mobile phone, and see their friends. To protect their privacy, they may prefer meetings not to be held at their school.

In the past, delays in decision-making could mark children out as different and cause them to miss out. In recent years many day-to-day decisions have been given to foster carers through **delegated authority**, which is recorded in the child's placement plan.

13. The development of children in foster care

A knowledge of child development is key to fostering. It helps you understand children better - all behaviour is linked to development, and for children in foster care the picture may be complicated by abuse and neglect, the quality of their attachments, and separation and loss. Each child is unique and develops at their own pace.

It helps to think about 'dimensions' of development: a child may reach the expected milestones in one area but fall behind in another. Seven dimensions of children's developmental needs have been defined by researchers (Parker et al, 1991):



The seven dimensions of a child's development (Parker et al, 1991).

- Health - physical and mental health, growth and development.
- Education - all areas of cognitive development, from birth.
- Emotions and behaviour - feelings and actions, first towards carers and then others.
- Identity - a growing sense of self, self-image and self-esteem.
- Family and peer relationships - stable, affectionate relationships and age-appropriate friendships.
- Self-care skills - skills for increasing independence, and later independent-living skills.
- Social presentation - understanding how the outside world (including online) sees them.

These seven dimensions give everyone in the team around the child a shared framework for seeing how a child is progressing and what still needs to be done.

14. How difficult early experiences may affect development (attachment and ACEs)

Secure, nurturing, consistent care gives a baby the best possible start and supports them through each developmental stage. Watch a baby and parent together: they copy, mirror and respond to each other's body language, expressions, voice, touch and gaze, and gradually learn to understand one another. This gentle process continues through childhood and adolescence.

Many children who are looked after may not have received this positive stimulation and nurturing care. This can affect every area of development and behaviour. A child who cannot yet recognise or communicate how they feel may become distressed and frustrated - feelings that can show as aggression, opposition or difficult behaviour. Development may be uneven: strong self-care skills but difficulty managing emotions, or good verbal skills but poor fine motor skills.

Studies of children raised in extremely neglectful conditions (Kaler and Freeman, 1994) found very poor language, cognitive and emotional development, and even physical changes to the brain. Crucially, later studies showed that some of these effects were reversed when children moved into new, nurturing environments (Rutter, 1998; Eluvathingal et al, 2006).

Foster carers can play a key role in the lives of the children they care for. In the absence of a nurturing parent, you can be a positive, lasting influence by offering stable, nourishing care - supporting a child's development across all seven dimensions.

KEY POINTS

- ✓ A child's development has seven dimensions, and progress across them can be uneven.
- ✓ Difficult early experiences can affect every area of development, including the brain.
- ✓ These effects can improve when a child receives stable, nurturing care.
- ✓ As a foster carer you can be a positive, lasting influence in a child's life.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think of a time you saw a child or young person thrive with the right support. What made the difference, and how could you offer that as a foster carer?

15. The wider picture: the current framework and reform

Fostering in England is governed by the **Children Act 1989**, the **Care Standards Act 2000**, the **Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011** and the **National Minimum Standards**, and fostering services are inspected by Ofsted. These place the child's welfare, safety and needs at the centre of everything we do.

Children's social care is being reformed. The government's strategy *Stable Homes, Built on Love* and the new **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026** are strengthening support for children in care and care leavers - including 'Staying Close' support for care leavers up to age 25. Your supervising social worker will keep you up to date on what these changes mean for you and the children you care for.

16. Evaluate your understanding

Use these five questions to check your understanding of the handbook. Choose one answer for each, then check the answer key at the end of this section.

1. **In foster care, the child's welfare is:**
 - a) one of several equal priorities
 - b) the paramount consideration
 - c) secondary to the birth family's wishes
2. **A child accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 is:**
 - a) subject to a care order made by a court
 - b) voluntarily accommodated, with parents keeping parental responsibility
 - c) in care, with parental responsibility shared with the local authority
3. **'Family time' is the current term for:**
 - a) the foster carer's own family activities
 - b) contact between a child and their birth family
 - c) a child's annual review meeting
4. **Which of these is one of the seven dimensions of a child's development?**
 - a) Identity
 - b) Punctuality
 - c) Obedience
5. **Research suggests the effects of difficult early experiences on a child's development:**
 - a) are always permanent

- b) can improve when a child receives stable, nurturing care
- c) only affect physical health

Answer key: 1 (b), 2 (b), 3 (b), 4 (a), 5 (b).

17. Evidence your completion

When you have read and digested this handbook, please complete the short Evaluation Form to evidence that you have completed the course. After you submit the form, we will send you your certificate.

If a couple have completed the course together, please include both of your names in the form.

Complete the Lorimer Learning Evaluation Form: <https://forms.office.com/e/eVVF5USjAu>

If you would like clarification, additional support or advice on any aspect of this material, please contact your supervising social worker or manager. See our Learning & Development policies and your PDP for timescales for completing this course.

References

- Farmer, E. et al (2007)
- Kaler, S. R. and Freeman, B. J. (1994)
- Parker, R. et al (1991)
- Rutter, M. (1998); Eluvathingal, T. J. et al (2006)
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