In this article Sylvia McCracken and Isobel Reilly apply systemic theory and practice to the assessment of foster carers. The authors believe that insufficient attention is paid to the foster carers’ family context and propose that the systemic approach provides a useful framework with which to address the complexities of fostering. Their systemic position derives from both the research findings on fostering outcomes and the recently articulated voices of the birth children of foster carers. Beginning with an analysis of the concerns currently impacting on fostering services and the aims which assessment is expected to achieve, the authors review and update the application of the systemic approach in foster care. An assessment model is developed, based on the premise that the foster family as a whole serves as the context for any placement.

Foster care in context

From the backdrop of legislative and policy imperatives about ‘partnership with parents’ and ‘child-centred’ services, through to the increasing challenges associated with the fostering task, the sense of a service at a crossroads is stark. For those involved in the delivery of fostering services, the complexities of the task point up the need for coherent and focused assessment.

We begin our analysis with the proposition that the significance of foster care seems unlikely to diminish. This is upheld by the Audit Commission (1994), which concluded that most children were better off with their own families and, of those who required care away from home, most were better off in foster care.

This preference for foster care is particularly apparent in Northern Ireland, the context within which we work, where for many years fostering has been seen as the superior option for children in the care of social services (Kelly and Coulter, 1997) with a doubling of the number in foster care over the last 25 years (Switzer, 1997). The statistics on placements away from home reveal fostering as the single most significant care arrangement. Targets set for fostering placements by the Government’s regional strategy for 1992–97 were achieved alongside a running down of residential homes. Kelly and Coulter pose the dilemma that in Northern Ireland we may be seeing foster care as the only option available, and ‘placement choice on the basis of children’s needs – an empty aspiration’ (p 9).

The National Foster Care Association (NFCA, 1997a) highlights the increased demands effected by changing trends in child care so that foster carers are now dealing with children who are older and have more complex problems and behavioural difficulties than in the past. NFCA’s claim that foster care is in crisis is supported by Berridge (quoted in Rickford, 1996, p 18) who has pointed out that

\[ \ldots \text{in the United Kingdom the number of children needing a foster care placement has increased by one-third during the same period that the number of foster care placements has fallen by one-third.} \]

The pressure on recruitment and retention of carers is one of the reasons given in the argument for the professionalisation of this ‘forgotten service’, another aspect of the current fostering context. The concept of ‘parenting plus’ has long since given way to the expectation that foster carers will provide sophisticated ‘care packages’ designed not only to meet a wide range of needs, but also subject to unprecedented levels of scrutiny. Yet the majority of foster carers remain essentially volunteers, paid basic maintenance allowances. Professionalisation of the
service with financial remuneration and specified terms and conditions has yet to be fully realised in policy and practice. The implications of the trend towards increased professionalisation for family or relative placements where assessment, training and financial remuneration take on a different meaning poses another set of questions (NFCA, 1993). O’Brien (1997) has outlined a new case management model developed in response to these.

Alert to both the establishment of quality standards for service provision and the occupational standards informing vocational qualifications in child care, agencies are beginning to consider how the evaluation and evidence of competence might fit with existing fostering assessment. Foster carers themselves are interested in the value of attaining external awards, and the recognition and affirmation this might afford (NFCA, 1997b).

Taking cognisance of the needs of the fostering family as a whole as well as the wider context within which children are placed in foster care, the spotlight is thrown once more on the need for thorough preparation prior to placement. The Utting Report (1997) highlights the inadequacies of ‘arrangements for the checking and assessing of foster carers’ (p 28) and recommends a thorough review of recruitment, selection, training and support with the emphasis upon the paramount need to safeguard the children.

The pressures highlighted above bear down upon a scarce resource for which assessment acts as a cornerstone: the first critical engagement of those parties who will be involved in the subsequent life of a fostering placement. It behoves responsible agencies to provide a clear and consistent assessment framework whereby aims and process are clearly defined.

**Defining assessment**

The issue of assessment of potential foster carers is fraught with difficulties, to the extent that the very paradigm of social work led assessment has been questioned (Ryburn, 1991). Foster care assessment could be criticised for its lack of a coherent theoretical base and its susceptibility to the orthodoxies currently in fashion. Over the last 20 years, it is possible to trace a gradual evolution from a psychodynamically oriented assessment to a task-centred approach, with group-based training playing a vital role (NFCA, 1997b). The wish to empower applicants as well as the need to ensure safe and positive care for children has resulted in an assessment process which is in many senses a hybrid, comprising elements of self-assessment, group assessment, vetting and training.

Assessment is a two-way process whereby the applicants and the fostering agency share information and decide together if fostering a child will work for all the parties concerned, including a potential foster child. The balance of power in this two-way process is nevertheless unequal since the agency ultimately makes the decision to appoint foster carers. Explicit criteria and standards for approval by the agency underpin the assessment process and it is against these that the assessing social worker must construct a methodology to elicit information, facilitate decision-making, evaluate potential and recommend placement type.

**The aims of assessment**

The aims of any fostering assessment must be to address the paramount needs of children accommodated or looked after by identifying potentially good quality, safe foster homes (NFCA, 1996). A thorough understanding of the family system into which a child is to be placed confronts issues such as personal histories, family culture, attitudes and boundaries. At the same time, the fostering agency has a duty to the carers and their children to prepare them in such a way that fostering placements ensure total care for everyone involved. Every member of a household will both affect and be affected by the presence of a foster child. It is our view that a systemic orientation brings out a realism and self-consciousness about the complexities of the fostering task for all concerned, involving all the parties in a more collaborative process and addressing the
demands of ensuring quality, safe and total care.

Quality care
Quality standards determine that each child has the right to be cared for by carers who have appropriate skills, training and support (SSI, 1996). Research has highlighted indicators of foster placement success which have been absorbed into criteria for approval. These include personal qualities and skills such as motivation linked to childlessness or identification with deprived or damaged children (Dando and Minty, 1987), flexibility, empathy, an ability to manage a range of behaviours and to work with different professionals, the capacity to be supportive of the child’s relationship with her or his birth family, and the possession of non-discriminatory attitudes (Triseliotis et al, 1995a).

Assessment serves the agency function of evaluating whether potential applicants will provide an environment in which relationships are experienced as positive and life enhancing, ie meeting the needs of the fostered child. Gilligan (1993) has pointed out that caring for children should be about the development of qualities which will strengthen their capacity to cope. These include self-esteem, self-efficacy, sociability, empathy, attachment and a sense of permanence.

Quality care also means consistent and stable care. Breakdown and disruption characterise many children’s experiences of fostering. Assessment practice must take heed of research findings which highlight the ‘complex and cumulative’ interplay of factors such as a child’s behaviour and foster family dynamics. (Aldgate and Hawley, 1986; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987). A systemic approach gives due attention to the need to achieve a fuller understanding of the foster family relationships and those points of potential strain and tension.

Safe care
While the agency wants to ensure a high standard of care and minimise breakdown, its overriding concern must be that children will be placed in safe, non-abusive homes. Literature on assessing for risk in the context of foster care is scant, nor is much research available regarding abuse by foster carers of children in their care. Macaskill (1991) notes that social workers must be vigilant to the possibility that sexual abuse can occur within foster families. Assessment provides the first opportunity for the social worker to consider with applicants the issue of safe care, by exploring not only sexual development and relationships but other aspects of family interaction and context which impinge upon child protection.

Total care
Potential carers must have the opportunity, as individuals and as a family, to consider what is best for them and, in the two-way process of the fostering assessment, whether they have the necessary motivation and capacity to foster. Applicants must be in full possession of the facts about the fostering tasks which lie ahead, including consideration of the foster family as a whole and the network of relationships which will support the foster child. Part (1993) highlights the contributions which foster carers’ birth children make to the success, or otherwise, of any fostering placement. Addressing the needs of ‘children who foster’, Pugh (1996), echoing Ames Reed (1994), points out some of the effects upon carers’ own children and their desire to be acknowledged and listened to. Part suggests that ways must be found to involve prospective foster carers’ children fully in the fostering assessment and preparation.

Once a social worker appreciates that every member of a household will both affect and be affected by the presence of a foster child, the imperative to involve all members in the assessment process becomes self-evident. To isolate applicants in individual interviews, to underestimate the significance of connections between parents and children, or to rely solely upon the applicants’ self-representation, diminishes the very essence of foster care. Practitioners whose central concern is the welfare of the foster child must not lose sight of the
welfare of the other children in the foster home. The assessment stage is the first step in guarding their interests and provides an opportunity to actively promote total care.

**A systemic approach to foster care assessment: key concepts**

Systemic theory offers a framework in which information about foster carer applicants can be gathered and evaluated and it also provides a collaborative and co-operative milieu for the assessment process. It recognises that individuals do not function in isolation but rather as part of highly organised systems, often with consistent behavioural patterns and beliefs. The most significant relationship grouping in our culture is the family, with its tasks of attachment, nurturing and intimacy, alongside its inevitable politics of power and control. Triseliotis *et al* (1995a, p 78) see the systemic perspective as

\[\ldots\text{particularly relevant when looking at the structure of the family, its flexibility, its interactions and how a child may be able, or be enabled, to fit in.}\ \ldots\ [the] couple relationships can also be examined within the same framework.\]

By identifying elements of the *family structure* which make up their day-to-day lives, potential carers and the social worker are able jointly to explore the behaviours and relationships, the routines and rituals, the family rules and boundaries, the support networks and stresses; in total all the factors which will contribute to placement outcomes. While collectively termed as assessment these different strands of evaluation, education and preparation interweave and layer the encounters between the social workers and foster family members. To this process a further dimension is added, which in family systems theory was called *feedback*. In contemporary systemic theory this concept has been expanded to include the *reflective* aspects of feedback. *Circularity* and *recursiveness* are similar terms and all capture the dynamic and evolving process whereby new information is absorbed, reflected upon and shapes future ideas and actions. For example, what happens in the training group sessions impacts on the individual sessions and vice versa; something said in one encounter may be revisited differently in the next, and a family’s experience of a particular child will impinge on their approach to another child.

The application of family systems theory to fostering practice is not new, but despite a number of contributions the literature is noticeably lacking in both an overall consideration of the systemic approach to fostering practice and any update on developments.

In making some general links to systemic theory, Rushton (1989, p 202) suggested that

\[\ldots\text{the systems approach lends itself well to foster care and adoption, dealing as it does with family transitions and shifts in interactional patterns \ldots [it] moves the focus away from parent-child interaction towards the family system (both new and birth families), as well as professional systems.}\]

Downes (1988) considered the value of the systemic idea of permeable *boundaries* alongside attachment theory as providing useful concepts which informed her research into the healing potential of time-limited foster care placements for adolescents. Earlier Robinson (1985), in an agency consultation, showed that knowledge about *family life cycle stages and transitions* highlighted the different stages currently facing foster parents and the young child in their care.

Several papers described the use made of a systemic perspective in the area of planning, consultation and professional advice. A family therapy approach to decision-making is detailed by Bentovim and Tranter (1984). They applied this to situations when the courts required a psychiatric assessment to assist in complex child care cases where competing needs were in conflict. They describe the tools deployed to ensure that the interests of the child were adequately
represented: these included tasks derived from an interactional perspective, genograms, life story books and play with family doll figures. An awareness of both the ‘surface action’ and an exploration of the history of events over time which they term ‘depth structure’ are emphasised as essential in assessing the whole family system.

Moving specifically to assessment, Anderson (1982) describes using a genogram and an interview with the whole family ‘to bring order and specificity to the selection of foster homes’. She proposed (p 46) that

...the dynamics of the applicant’s family permit a more rational basis for deciding which child to place with which family. The more we understand the interplay of the parts, the more control we have over decisions that influence the outcome of the foster home placements.

Triseliotis (1995a) suggests that the systemic approach goes some way to making the assessment process ‘more open and objective and less dependent on the judgment and intuitive flair of the individual worker’ (p 79).

While this may be so, the lack of any apparent update in the fostering field of the theoretical and practice developments which the systemic approach could bring has meant that opportunities to respond to Triseliotis’s suggestion have been limited. There has been no updating to include the changes in the field wrought in response to the feminist and social justice critiques of family therapy and its failure to deal with issues of power, gender and social exclusion. Also absent is any account of post-modern influences, such as social constructionism, which have stimulated family therapists to develop more overtly collaborative approaches (de Shazer, 1991; Anderson, 1997). The whole richness of creative possibilities encouraged by the narrative therapy field of systemic practice (White and Epston, 1990; Roberts, 1994; Freedman and Combs, 1996) appears lost to fostering practice, yet attention to narrative and stories features in most other work with children in care. Recent UK family therapy texts have not given foster families much attention either, even though their respective subject matter might have opened up some possibilities, eg Reimers and Treacher (1995) on user-friendly family therapy and Byng-Hall (1995) on family scripts and the family as secure base. Wilson (in press) should redress this imbalance with examples from foster care of child-focused systemic practice.

Turning to our perspective on a systemic family approach to foster care assessment, in response to Ryburn’s (1991) critique and call for more open and equitably based assessments, we have sought to identify those components of assessment which contain the potential for collaborative partnership. We are of the view that the systemic stance of curiosity (Cecchin, 1987) and attention to the recursiveness of human behaviour and interaction equip the assessor to take more account of all the various components and possibilities, while retaining an independent position and appreciation of the authority vested in the agency.

In addition to the concepts italicised and described above, we have found that the ideas about context and meaning from contemporary systemic thinking provide us with a useful theoretical base in which to locate our practice and develop a more family-focused approach to fostering assessments.

**Context**

A systemic approach, drawing on both second order thinking about the position of the worker as part of the system, as well as earlier ideas from the cybernetics-based model of systems theory, require that we be attentive to the whole context of fostering. This recognises not only all the interconnecting parts but also increases an awareness of and respect for the dominant themes or discourse informing foster care.

Lindsey (1985), in a paper on consultations with professional and family systems in residential and fostering services, proposed the application of systemic thinking as
providing a framework for working with multiple systems, allowing the disentangling of different views and an appreciation of the impact these can have on practice. The systemic framework allows us to bring into focus the ‘who’s who’ in the foster family configuration: the foster child, the foster carers and their family (nuclear and extended), the foster child’s birth family, the key social work personnel and the organisations involved, such as the specialist fostering agencies, social services, school, etc.

Added to these and significantly impinging on the fostering picture are the ‘whys and wherefores’ – the dominant discourse as reflected in such dimensions as the statutory requirements, patterns of foster care provision, public and social attitudes, and the established practice wisdom as to what constitutes functional family life and optimal child care. A grasp of all these intricate threads and layerings is critical to an appreciation of the context of fostering. The stage is therefore set for several potentially different and complex foster care scenarios to unfold in an assessment, depending on the specific circumstances. What may be helpful in relative fostering arrangements may be completely altered for short-term placements and what may be appropriate contact for birth family members in one situation may be construed as unwise in another.

Meaning
Current systemic family therapy practice pays acute attention to language and the narrative by which people strive to make sense of and bring meaning to their world. In the fostering assessment process this attention to individual and family stories, from a stance of curiosity and genuine interest, doesn’t privilege one person’s story over another and as such sensitively conveys the value of respect. How ideas about the way in which our ‘reality’ is co-constructed in and through conversations with others is a useful concept with which to view the ‘getting to know you’ interplay of fostering assessments.

An assessment model
Content
The systemic model we propose focuses on how information may be exchanged and gathered so that those reporting to a fostering panel are able to demonstrate applicants’ potential as foster carers. The traditional elements of assessment upheld by Utting (1997), such as medical reports, references, witness reports, legal documentation of marriage and residence, police, social services, accommodation and safety checks, provide essential corroborative evidence. However, they do not give the insight into family culture and systems necessary for social workers to make informed placement choices, nor do they prepare carers for the tasks which lie ahead.

As with the task-centred and psychodynamic modalities, the content of a systemic assessment will of necessity include some material from the applicants’ own life experience and how this has influenced them as adults. Information on the past will be drawn on but rather than privileging it in a specifically causal way, such as in the psychodynamic model, the focus will be primarily on the present and anticipating the future in a manner more akin to the task-centred model.

Whatever combination of individual, couple, group and family sessions or mix of training, preparation and evaluation evolves, the focus of a systemically informed assessment will be to provide as full a picture as possible of the fostering context in which a child will be placed. By identifying the key players in the applicants’ network, ie those who will have direct and repeated contact with a fostered child, and by holding sessions involving all the household or family members together and in different combinations, the worker and applicants will gain more of a sense of what a placement will mean and how it will impact on the whole foster family. For example, applicants’ own children should take part in sessions which involve them in interactive tasks or exercises such as drawing a family tree or playing family role games. Likewise, members of the extended family or carers’ support
network who will be sharing some child care tasks may be encouraged to become involved in sessions focused on exploring issues of safe care.

The tools and techniques derived from family therapy are particularly useful in helping the worker engage with all family members around the tasks of the fostering assessment. Already familiar to many family and child care social workers are the ecomap, the lifeline or snake and the genogram. These, along with games-based exercises such as use of role cards on family roles and responsibilities, tap into the family’s own resources in a constructive and collaborative way. Use can be made of family photographs and memorabilia, helping the family build up a picture of itself which allows for new possibilities to emerge, as will happen when it includes a foster child. The family life space drawing, used sensitively and contextualised to show how relationships, closeness and attachments change over time, is a powerful tool in preparing a family for the inclusion of new members and links with the ‘other family’ out there, ie the birth family. Equally statements such as those contained in the McMaster Family Assessment Questionnaire (Epstein et al, 1983) can be used to explore the family’s ideas about the changes a new member will bring. Masson and O’Byrne’s (1984) compilation of family therapy based facilitative exercises and tasks can be adapted for fostering assessments.

Process

Contributing significantly to the process of systemic interviewing are the skills of hypothesising and circular questioning. These have stood substantial testing over the last two decades since they were established as central to the repertoire of systemic practice (Palazzoli et al, 1980). Systemic hypothesising encourages the worker to make links between different pieces of information, from the overall context to the specifics of behaviour and events. An explanation as to how things are the way they are is developed from all the different pieces of information the worker has learned, usually drawing on a mix of facts, observations and ideas the family have about themselves. Hypothesising is a useful skill for the assessing social worker, testing ideas and revisiting assumptions.

The methodology of circular questioning helps the worker to shift from a more straightforward, linear interviewing mode to a style which elicits relational material, connecting events, feelings, behavioural sequences and individual reactions. They can be used to explore past, present and future or hypothetical situations and the ideas held about them (Fleuridas et al, 1986; Benson et al, 1991). Comparison and classification questions can elicit material about behaviours, beliefs or feelings in a way which situates the information in an overall family frame with its network of relationships. For example, in ascertaining parents’ views of how their family might differ from others they could be asked: ‘Do the children fight more than most brothers and sisters do, less, or are they about average?’. A useful question to explore differences from the family of origin might be: ‘How close is s/he to the children compared to how close your dad was to you when you were growing up?’; and to look at the potential impact of a foster child on the family: ‘Who would be the most likely to make friends first, who next, who after that?’.

The conversations generated by these questions alert the worker to the different sense which family members may be making of events and each other’s reactions. It also taps that pool of the largely unspoken and unsaid. The experience of being interviewed in this way can encourage family members to be more attuned to each other’s individual differences in how the every-day patterns of family life are perceived and processed. In this way, too, the ground can be prepared for a greater sensitivity to the impact of the foster child on the family and the likely differences it will mean for each member.

General considerations about structure

In our development of systemic fostering assessments we have tried to integrate the
familiar components of individual and couple sessions within an overall family-friendly frame, consistent with contemporary concerns about ‘user involvement’. We do not hold hard and fast views as to the definitive number of sessions, who should be there and the sequence in which they are conducted. Flexibility and responsiveness are hallmarks of contemporary systemic practice so formulae which ‘close off’ rather than ‘open out’ options are to be avoided. Group training sessions may run prior to or concurrent with the assessment sessions, facilitating links between content. Then fewer home-based sessions may be needed. On the other hand, additional sessions may be required in any assessment, depending on specific ‘family stories’ or areas of concern. Age, literacy and language skills will also influence the structure of the assessment sessions. However, it is important to guard against dragging out the process unnecessarily.

We also recommend that the assessment is conducted within the context of a team approach, with material brought back for consultation and review. Too often the individual social worker conducts the assessment in a vacuum when conjoint management and co-working in pairs can stimulate more objective reflection and processing of the sessions. Consultation with a co-worker need not be reserved for post-session discussions but can take place during an assessment session, in the presence of or indeed separate from the applicant family. Laycock, Thorley and Schatzberger (1987) advocated a team approach in their critique of traditional home-based assessments. They sought to bring in more objectivity and, by working in pairs and as a team, reduced the number of sessions to two office-based meetings after an initial home visit by another team member to explain the assessment process.

As to the location of the assessment sessions, it is our experience that applicants are empowered when they are conducted in their own homes rather than on agency premises, which engender an altogether different dynamic more commonly associated with a therapeutic context. After all, the reality for the accommodated or looked after child will be the carers’ home environment and not the social worker’s office.

Before embarking on the series of assessment sessions outlined below we suggest a preliminary meeting with the adult applicants to discuss the format, check out information about household composition and clarify any items they want to raise before the process gets underway. The worker brings a full repertoire of skills to all these sessions, combining linear with circular questioning, and family-friendly interviewing tools and techniques within an overall approach of curiosity and enquiry. The second and fourth sessions could be amalgamated while the final session could finish with tasks incorporating the whole family, such as putting together a storybook for the foster child about the family, their home and the other people involved in their daily lives.

**Suggested structure**

- **Session 1**
  - **Participants:** all family/household members.
  - **Focus:** getting to know you, listening to the family’s stories of who’s who, their attributes, the relationship patterns in the family and with significant external networks. Links are made, as appropriate, to training material and thinking about caring for children in need.
  - **Systemic tools/techniques:** genogram, network/ecomap.

- **Session 2**
  - **Participants:** adult applicants are interviewed individually. For couples these interviews are ideally done in two parallel sessions by the co-workers who later reconvene with the couple for a review of what each brings from their own life story. Alternatively one worker can interview one partner in the presence of the other.
  - **Focus:** personal, social and psychosexual development, life cycle stages and transitions, extended family themes and patterns. Own experiences of good
parenting, problem solving and caring for others from their family of origin will be a resource in caring for children abused or in need.

**Systemic tools/techniques:** lifeline/snake, life cycle developmental stages within a three-generational context, genogram revisited.

- **Session 3**
  **Participants:** all family household members in a more interactive task and games-based session.
  **Focus:** roles, alliances and boundaries; support networks and significant others; links with fostered child’s network.
  **Systemic tools/techniques:** role cards and ecomaps.

- **Session 4**
  **Participants:** the adult/couple applicants together.
  **Focus:** couple/partner relationship, intimacy, sexuality, childlessness (if an issue), employment, stability and longer-term placement expectations.
  **Systemic tools/techniques:** marital interaction cards/exercise.

- **Session 5**
  **Participants:** family members of sufficient age and understanding.
  **Focus:** fostering context – agency, social workers, foster child’s family; key issues are confidentiality, and safe and total care.
  **Systemic tools/techniques:** ecomap, case studies (challenging behaviour), questions to elicit ideas about problem solving.

- **Session 6 (split)**
  **Participants:** 1) children of foster carers, without parents present; 2) whole family.
  **Focus:** expectations of fostering, family changes and total care.
  **Systemic tools/techniques:** family box, family album, story or case exercises.

**Documentation**
One of the most common questions asked when the authors have been exploring this model of assessment with fostering and adoption practitioners is how the information amassed should be documented. Clearly the social worker has a responsibility to record the content and outcome of the work with the applicants in such a way that (a) the agency fostering committee or panel which accepts or approves an application has a sound basis upon which to make their decision and (b) the carers and the agency are able to audit the assessment process.

The Barnardo’s Edinburgh Fostering Team (Hevney and McFadden, 1996) utilise a ‘stocktaking’ consultation meeting after the first couple of meetings with the fostering applicants, after which a letter summarising issues and feedback is written to the applicants. Work may be undertaken in individual and joint sessions and further consultation meetings will track the assessment. The team have found that the records of these consultation meetings provide much of the content of the final report.

We strongly believe that assessment reports should not take the form of extended narrative notes, giving lengthy ‘blow by blow’ accounts of the process. The report format we have developed briefly records the contact with the family and summarises the sessions as outlined above. The pictorial and diagrammatic material generated in the course of the sessions, such as life paths, ecomaps, genograms and family album/box, contributes a very immediate sense of the family and supplements the report. These not only provide evidence of the assessment process but are also a rich resource for the family to draw on in preparing themselves for the challenges ahead. Overall our emphasis is on brief descriptions and significant material, leaving scope for fuller elaboration and discussion at the panel decision stage.

We advocate the use of headings which organise and summarise the often overwhelming wealth of information on family functioning, bearing in mind the critique about objectivity (Ryburn, 1991) and Wilkinson’s cautioning about the need to use widely recognised and validated descriptors (1987). The headings have been adapted from existing family assessment schedules, see Epstein et al (1983), Loader et al (1983)
and Wilkinson and Stratton (1991), and include:

- Family structure (the marital/couple, parenting and children/sibling systems);
- Family development/history, beliefs and rules;
- Relationship patterns – behavioural and emotional connectedness;
- Parent/child interface – hierarchy and boundaries, care and control;
- Problem solving;
- Communication.

These headings may also be used by the worker as a checklist in planning and preparation.

The worker’s final task is then to link the session content and the ‘family work’ material with the criteria, competences or areas for consideration by the fostering panel, which is done by way of a standard BAAF form F1 and F2 or agency prescribed format. Utting (1997) has expressed reservations about these forms, however, saying that they are not sufficiently geared to safeguard children and suggesting they be reviewed with that requirement in mind.

Conclusion

In addressing the need for a coherent and consistent approach to foster carer assessment, ensuring quality, safe and total care, the authors have taken account of the available research findings highlighting the factors associated with positive outcomes (Berridge, 1997). The significance of carer family dynamics and the role played by the carers’ own children underpin the systemic approach which we have developed.

Systemic theory and practice provides a ready-made and comprehensive framework for understanding families and the systems which impinge on them. By focusing on the family network it values and empowers adults and children alike, giving voice to all the significant family members. It sets up observable and felt interactions between members of the applicant network and between the applicants and the agency worker(s) by way of specific question formats, exercises and tools. Potential carers, whether they be relative or non relative, are involved in collaborative activities and discussions which aim to explore their family dynamics in the context of foster care, and are conducted in a way which is respectful of their feelings and aspirations.

At the same time the assessing social worker is encouraged to maintain a reflective and objective stance, bringing a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of foster carer assessment as the foundation for engagement with applicants. Once familiar with systemic concepts and techniques, many of which are mirrored in standard training courses (NFCA, 1994), practitioners gain confidence in making recommendations to fostering committees regarding acceptance and placement matching issues.

In an attempt to develop aspects of existing systemic theory and techniques relevant to foster carer assessment and to incorporate contemporary thinking about context, meaning and language, we have found the term assessment in itself a rather unsatisfactory description of the fostering process which follows. Furthermore, a systemic application does not negate the fact that social workers and carers can never fully determine risk, rule out the possibility of abuse by carers or predict successful placement outcomes, particularly if the decision to foster is fixed and limited to one given point in time. Perhaps one of the most crucial conclusions to be drawn from this exercise is that assessment does not end as soon as a child is placed with carers but is simply a first step in a dynamic and evolving relationship between the carer family, the child, the child’s family and the agency. Training, support, matching needs and abilities, regular review of care plans and the dynamics within the carer family all have a part to play in the ongoing fostering process.

Finally, the ambiguity of commending a systemic approach at a time when a functional analysis and competency based model is being promulgated at many
levels of training is not lost on the authors. There is anxiety that the learning and experience which has been acquired and established over a considerable time will not be sufficiently captured or valued by the more mechanistic approaches to skill acquisition currently in fashion. The dynamic and interactional perspectives which the systemic field contributes could offset some of the more negative aspects of this reductionism. As Triseliotis et al (1995b, p 44) point out, however, ‘attention to process and relationships . . . are central in family and child care work’ and, we would contend, the very essence of foster care.

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