Assessing and matching foster care relationships: An interactional framework

**Eddy Street** and **Mike Davies** explore ideas behind the current typical professional response to the placement of children in foster care and its breakdown. They discuss theories of family functioning in terms of their relevance to the assessment of the fostering relationship and outline a model of assessment based on the theory of Behavioural Exchange, which uses checklists for children and questionnaires for adults. Using clinical examples, they go on to explore particular behaviours found in looked after children in terms of this model and assessment process. The need for further research is emphasised.

**Introduction**

The shift from placing children in larger residential units to placing them in foster care has brought with it its own set of problems. The numbers of foster placements are never enough and the amount of children with complex needs appears to be increasing. In this situation there is need to ensure the appropriateness and durability of all foster placements in order that children may derive all the potential benefits. Unfortunately, however, due to limited resources the decision to place a child with particular carers is typically guided by pragmatism, rather than selecting a particular placement to meet the individual needs of that child. The child tends to be placed wherever a vacancy can be found and this undoubtedly contributes to the sequence of placement breakdowns experienced by so many looked after children (see Berridge and Cleaver, 1987). In this situation the central issue becomes not just the availability of resources but the use of these resources to maximum advantage.

**Research and assumptions**

Research has attempted to address some of the issues and factors involved in successful and unsuccessful foster placements. Some evidence to date suggests that the ‘best predictor of placement breakdown is previous breakdown’ (Berridge and Cleaver, 1987). Placements are more likely to break down where there is already a child of the same age living in the family or where adolescents have significant behaviour problems (Parker, 1966). Referring particularly to adoption practice, recent work by Triseliotis and colleagues (1997) has identified agency factors associated with more successful placements. These include: comprehensive preparation of children and adoptees; preparing families to understand that love is not enough; building into new arrangements important emotional links from the child’s past; comprehensive post-placement support and services; access to specialist services, including educational and child mental health; and careful matching of children’s needs with new carers. Unfortunately the authors do not elucidate what is involved in good matching.

Evaluating ‘good practice’ factors in her recent research, Waterhouse (1997) overwhelmingly identified service strengths as being the operation of a discreet and independent service, with a skilled team of workers and experienced group of carers, and good initiatives for recruitment, assessment, training and support. In terms of positive outcome factors associated with the child, Sellick (1996) identified the presence of good experiences during the first year of life and where carers and child saw similarities in each other. Again the nature of those perceived similarities are not fully discussed. In a North American study, Doelling and Johnson (1990) examined factors associated with the child and foster carers’ temperaments in an attempt to relate this to foster placement outcome. Their hypothesis was that a combination of carer/child variables would be most predictive of placement success – a hypothesis based on a ‘goodness of fit’
model. The study’s findings suggest that ‘inflexibility’ in the female carer and a child with negative mood had implications for less successful placements. Doelling and Johnson note that the mechanisms through which different types of mismatching occur remain unclear and that the ‘negative interaction patterns’ which arise out of significant mismatches are worthy of further research. Given this situation, it would seem logical to consider that placement outcome is highly related to the interaction and relationship that develops between the child and the carer’s family (Wolkind and Rushton, 1994). In reviewing the research on fostering placements of older maltreated children, Rushton and Mayes (1997) note that ‘late’ placements do produce evidence of satisfying relationships between children and carers, but that the part played by the carer’s parenting behaviour in producing this outcome deserves more attention. They further point out how there is clearly no message arising from empirical study as to how particular placements work and others do not. Clearly, although pointing to the importance of carer–child interaction, research does not suggest how that interaction should be viewed and evaluated.

In examining the features of carer–child interaction it is appropriate to consider ideas that direct professional practice. The original notions that led to the development of Community Homes with Education and Family Group homes were in a sense an updating of the orphanage ideas, namely that some children could not be cared for by their birth parents and needed looking after in places that might improve the ways in which they related to the world. The demise of residential provision has been based on the view that a family is better than an institution as a location for child care and this has tended to be applied carte blanche. This view is based on the hypothesis that children from deprived and abusive backgrounds would be generally helped if they were looked after in a similar way to most children in most homes. It assumes that development for any child is inherently good and that if one provides positive experiences for a child in a good home he or she will automatically develop and settle. As the child accommodates to the foster family, approved behaviour and qualities are expected to appear. A practice corollary of this notion would identify the child as having the ‘problem’ of not being able to accept the natural development opportunities that are available in the foster family and therefore remedies may be necessary for the child individually. However, it may be that the problems are in the ‘natural’ way the child and foster carer interact; this may be the root cause. These assumptions about the nature of child behaviour do not find support from developmental psychology, where it is known that the development of some children continues along problematic pathways due to the nature of their early upbringing (Cicchetti and Olsen, 1991; Skurse and Bentovim, 1994). Hence in the fostering of children with problems in their emotional and social development, and who therefore present with complex needs, it is important to consider the issue of child–carer fit.

Professional models: ‘needs’
Apart from underlying assumptions, the most cited guiding principles of determining child placements have been based on what can be termed the ‘needs’ model. Typically, the way in which this model is utilised is to identify in the child some deficits, particular unfortunate historical experiences and general characteristics, and then attempt to specify elements of family and parental characteristics that would be considered helpful to the child. Hence it is assumed that a child who has had a poor relationship with her or his father is likely to have difficulties with men, therefore a foster placement should be provided with awareness of this issue. Similarly children who have spent a long time parenting younger children would be well placed as the youngest in a family so they can benefit from being relinquished from that inappropriate role. Unfortunately there is no formalised way of listing or evaluating such needs and the use of the model would appear to rest
to a large extent on the empathic understandings (not to say common sense) of adults. With such a model the idea of specifying the validity of any established need is not achieved by any assessment process other than that of professional consensual agreement. In similar vein to this argument Ryburn (1991) has discussed the concept of assessment in fostering and adoption, believing it to be fundamentally flawed. Adopting a post-modern perspective, he argues that the notion implies that the professional ‘knows best’, leading them to search for an ‘objective reality’ which does not exist. In place of assessment he argues that ‘consumers’ (children, parents, extended families and prospective carers) should be more involved in the whole process of selection and that listening to children is an integral part of that. Although Ryburn’s criticism corresponds in part to the arguments offered here, it is based solely on a social work conception of the assessment process and neglects the contribution that could be made from other perspectives, such as that of psychometrics. But as Ryburn suggests, any evaluation of the present approach is simply a post hoc consideration of whether the professional consensus was accurate or not. Similarly, as he proposes, the placement itself is not a static entity and the dynamic properties of the foster carer–child interaction is a feature that needs to be attended to closely.

Against this background there is clearly a need to identify issues that would lead to a consideration of the child–foster carer dimension as being essential in the process of finding a suitable placement for a child. Clearly what is required is the construction of an interactional framework for evaluating a foster placement for any particular child. To undertake this it is first necessary to look at the concept of matching.

The principles of matching

As a concept, matching implies that the child and the foster carer will both naturally bring something to the establishment of a relationship between them that will allow for that relationship to develop in the long term. This acknowledges the reciprocal nature of development generally; namely that as adults grow and pass through life their own development can benefit the children they care for and vice versa. Such a notion provides an appropriate focus on the child and her or his interests within the context of the foster care relationship. As noted above, the past tendency was to think about the foster care situation separate from the child, but by paying due attention to the matching process as reciprocal it becomes possible to consider this situation from the perspective of both contributors to the relationship, ie child and carer. The foster carers require a child who is going to mesh with them, their family and their natural behaviour in such a way that they can deal with the child in a relaxed fashion. The ways in which the child develops and behaves should correspond with the carers’ expectation of child development and the growth of a parental relationship.

What is required in this field is the development of an interactive model in which elements of the child’s behaviour are considered within the context provided by potential carers’ interactive behaviour. The aim of such a model would be to describe children’s behaviour in a functional manner, ie in a day-to-day interactive style, and then do the same in relation to the possible reciprocal parental behaviour. Having done this, it should be possible, on a case by case basis, to predict ways in which a child and foster carer may reciprocally match or not. In other words the model should be able to consider possible interactive patterns prior to placement and hence have some predictive capabilities. In essence this is to suggest that, even before child and potential foster carers meet, it should be possible to construct an estimation as to how those individuals may interact and the likely development of that interaction. This assumes some consistency of behaviour of the child in different contexts, as well as a consistency of adult behaviour with different children. In some senses, given the nature of the child–adult context of fostering, it may be necessary to view the relationship as a
parental/family one. In order to do this it will be necessary to make use of the theories of family behaviour and interaction.

**Interactive models**

There are a variety of models of interaction that emanate from a range of family theories (see Klein and White, 1996) and many offer ways in which family interaction can be assessed. In essence these models highlight certain aspects of behaviour that can be described in relationships and can be used to consider different dimensions of the parent–child relationship. Examples of such models include the Family Development model (Rodgers and White, 1993). This focuses on the patterned changes in family life over time and utilises such concepts as family position, norms, roles, transitions and developmental tasks. Therapeutic applications of this approach are outlined by Carter and McGoldrick (1988) who emphasise the importance of managing stress and enhancing coping strategies within the family. Another approach is that of the Systems Theory described in its highest theoretical sociological formulation by Parsons (1951). The assumptions of this model are that system elements are interconnected, can only be understood as wholes and affect themselves through feedback. Systems are seen to attempt to always be in equilibrium. Authors such as Burr et al (1983) and Broderick (1993) have considered the application of this model to families. This approach has spawned the Family Systems approach to family therapy, an example being Olson et al (1988) who describe a view of family functioning known as the Circumplex model. Associated with this model is a series of assessment techniques which categorise a family on a number of dimensions.

The way these models are constructed, however, limit their applicability to the fostering context owing to the problem of historical transposition. Many aspects of the behaviour of children in foster care will be linked to their interactive experiences with their birth parents and hence the models do not identify and suggest ways in which the foster carer may respond to particular child behaviours in a manner that is developmentally enhancing. Such models only present data in terms of similarities and differences, and do not indicate potential helpful or unhelpful elements of interaction that would impinge on a child's developmental progress. To take this point further, in the Olson et al (1988) Circumplex model for example, its use of assessment techniques may indicate that the birth family is disengaged, the suggested reciprocal pattern being that the child and birth parent(s) are disengaged from one another. In the fostering situation, however, it may be that the child, owing to his or her history, behaves in a disengaged manner, whereupon the advice to the foster carers would be for them to be aware of this and respond accordingly, which would not necessarily be in a disengaged way. Information of how the carer could behave does not easily evolve from many of these models and theories of family functioning. Clearly what is required in the fostering situation is to identify particular dimensions of a child–parent interaction that are applicable to children who have developed particular characteristics and learnt behaviours as a result of adversity, and to identify how a carer may respond to child behaviour in a manner that is developmentally enhancing. Unfortunately therefore, many of the established theories and assessment techniques are likely to prove unhelpful in this task and it will be necessary to construct new means of assessing the situation, means that will still need to be based within a general interactive framework.

**The Behavioural Exchange model**

In these circumstances the most helpful model is the Behavioural Exchange model as outlined by Nye (1979). This model is based on the view that participants in social interaction evaluate the ‘exchanged’ interaction in terms of costs and benefits. It casts the participants as then rationally deciding
to interact in the way they do, based on how they view the psychological rewards and costs of continuing the interaction and relationship. Klein and White (1996) have outlined the criticisms of the model which focus on the applicability of rationality and utilitarianism to human relationships and rearing children within those relationships. Elements of the behavioural framework are, however, well applied to management techniques for child behaviour and it is a basic set of conceptions that can be well adapted to various elements of child–parent behaviour. The notion of reward in this model is abstract and sufficiently free of content for any behaviour to provide the means of ‘exchange’ within a parenting context. Therefore as a means of investigating the possible and potential interaction between a child and a foster carer the model offers a framework for considering that interaction.

What child behaviours are experienced as being rewarding by foster carers and hence enhance the relationship with a foster child? Similarly, what adult behaviours are rewarding to a particular child in foster care and therefore assist the process of establishing a relationship that will endure over time? It is possible to outline a number of dimensions of behaviour that typically describe children in foster care; some of these dimensions will tap into behaviour within the ‘normal’ range and hence are applicable to any child, whereas others will be particularly relevant to children who have suffered disruptions to their developmental processes. By applying the notion of reciprocity, adult behaviours can also be described which in some instances will be appropriate ways of responding but in others not – a view in which clinical acumen will be important.

As an example of applicability of this framework to the fostering situation let us consider ‘emotional expressiveness’. Relationships vary in the way individuals talk to each other about their feelings. They also vary in the degree of inquisitiveness on the part of one person seeking out emotions and meanings from another. Different individuals will experience ‘emotional’ talk and inquisitiveness differentially in terms of the rewards and costs they provide in the relationship. In this particular interactive context clinical experience suggests that children who have suffered much adversity, similar to children generally, vary in their degree of emotional expressiveness, with some actively wishing to talk about themselves and others having nothing to say. Additionally these children may exhibit ambivalence about expressing emotions and can often experience a period of uneasiness after they have expressed themselves a great deal. In the same way some children, although they are quite involved in a general day-to-day chatty style with parents, do not deal with the world with the depth of experience that others do and the emotional colouring of their life is more matter of fact. Other children, owing to their age and relationship with their own problems, have a very disjointed way of expressing themselves. It is not unusual to find that children who offer solely negative emotional expression prefer to be emotionally distanced from the person who ‘receives’ that expression. On the adult side of the relationship some parents find it very rewarding when a child is emotionally demonstrative and talks freely about him- or herself. Others experience children as more rewarding when they ‘just get on with being a child’ and emotional conversation is limited. In essence parents differ in their definition of emotionality in childhood. Parents also vary in the way in which they are psychologically inquisitive of children, that is they vary in the extent they encourage their child to talk about their feelings and perceptions. Psychologically inquisitive parents report a need to fully understand what their child thinks and feels about events, and gain security from being able to appreciate (from their perspective) how their child is dealing with current tasks. Not all parents are like this. There may even be a continuum of parental preferences which outlines the extent that parents wish to be psychologically inquisitive about any child in their care.
This continuum may be influenced by class and gender factors.

The Behaviour Exchange model would clearly predict problems for any fostering relationship in which a ‘non-talking’ child is placed with an emotionally inquisitive foster carer. The child would not meet the carer’s expectation as the extent of ‘psychological’ involvement would not be rewarding. The child would probably be aware of getting something wrong and possibly withdraw somewhat from the relationship, which in turn may interactively create a spiralling problem whereby the parent approaches and the child withdraws. Similarly a child who wishes to be very expressive and is placed with a parent who does not expect or seek expressiveness would be experienced as ‘emotionally demanding’ and so another set of difficulties would emerge.

This example demonstrates that, in order to match prospective participants’ specific interactive behaviours, it will be important to specify behaviour at a level higher than a mere behavioural event as this would lead to a ‘behavioural manual’ type approach. At the same time it is necessary not to categorise the behaviour at too high a level, such as a personality characteristic, as this would replicate the problems of the ‘needs’ approach. For prospective matching in the fostering context it will be helpful to specify interactive behaviour that can be readily identified as characteristic of a particular individual, giving an indication of interactive preference of that person in a parent–child relationship and hence of it being potentially functional within that relationship. Should the child and carer be found to be a mismatch then alternative carers would need to be identified for the child.

By using this framework it would be feasible to empirically identify potential parent–child partnerships within such an ‘expressiveness’ context. Questionnaires and rating scales could be established to tap into this behavioural dimension. The child behaviour relevant to this context could be assessed via rating scales with a number of informants who know and meet the child. Such scales would attempt to rate the degree children freely talk about their feelings, the extent they are seeking to comprehend elements of their life history, the variation of their response to an ‘emotional’ discussion, etc. Foster carers could be asked questions concerning their own behaviour and preferences, eg ‘I enjoy talking to children about their feelings’; ‘I feel left out if a child does not tell me how he or she is feeling’. Questionnaires about adults’ beliefs about childhood and childhood problems would also be relevant, eg ‘Children who don’t talk about their feeling and problems will meet trouble later in life’; ‘Children work things out for themselves as long as they are cared for well’; ‘Children who have met adversity always benefit from being able to understand what has happened to them’. Scores from these empirical assessments could then be compared both retrospectively and prospectively to ascertain the ‘matches’ that appear to work and those combinations that should be avoided. Concurrent assessments of children to be fostered and prospective foster carers would provide profiles that would then aid the placement decision process.

**Behavioural dimensions for assessment**

Considering the situation in this way, it is possible to compile a list of behaviours that disadvantaged children tend to exhibit. These behaviours will show a wide range within the group under discussion. The manner of categorisation and description of these behaviours will then point to appropriate parenting behaviour relevant and reciprocal to the interactive situation with the child. Possible dimensions of relevant behaviour in addition to emotional expressiveness are listed below.

**Emotional closeness/distance**

This describes a dimension that is related to emotional expressiveness. Some children may require a great deal of emotional proximity that may be just physical. Others may prefer to operate from a more distant basis. A range exists between these two extremes as it does with parental expectations with regard to this continuum. Also related to this is
emotional reactivity. Some children are very reactive to the situation around them; they are quick to pick up clues to emotional difficulties and usually have a tendency to act out at these perceived difficulties or at the very least comment on them. Other children have very high thresholds before they respond to emotional situations and require a great deal of emotional expression around them before they interact meaningfully. Such differences in children will lead to them being perceived in parental contexts as too reactive or too distant because there will be different norms about reactivity in different families. Again appropriate rating scales could identify child behaviour and questionnaires on foster carers’ preferences would identify the reciprocal behaviour, eg ‘I enjoy a great deal of physical contact with foster children’; ‘Children who don’t like physical contact always have some underlying problem that requires help’; ‘I prefer that children do not respond to the things that might be worrying me.’

**Behaviour problems and structure**

Behavioural problems in children can be perceived as very ‘costly’ for some parents, especially if there is no change over time with that behaviour. Other parents may experience such behaviour as ‘just the way it is’, based on a view of child development which sees constant ‘naughtiness’ and the need for structure as inherent elements of any parent–child interaction. It is noticeable in general clinical practice that some parents have an expectation that a child will automatically internalise a code of behaviour with little input from them, as is the case with school-aged children who readily conform. Other parents naturally see their role as continually providing structure for a child and hold a practical view that the rules of that structure need not be verbalised to the child. Management difficulties emerge when there is a parent with the first approach (internalising) and a child who would be better managed by the second, in other words a child who is unlikely to meet the expectation that he or she will know what to do without parental guidance. Given the prevalence of behavioural problems in children in foster care, the variety of parental approaches to child management is very important. Attitudinal and attributional questionnaires on themes related to behavioural problems and management would need to be constructed for foster carers, while for children some of the standardised behaviour scales may be appropriate (Achenbach and McConaughty, 1997).

**Attitude to birth parents**

Children in foster care always have a range of attitudes towards their birth parents, leading to a corresponding variety of behaviours. These can include the child who actively feels rejected and range from the child who is very psychologically linked, to the child who is indifferent to her family and to all intents and purposes completely separated. Foster carers differ in the degree they feel able and/or wish to deal with contact. This is an area where it is important to identify carers’ preferences since, in the placement process, pragmatic considerations often result in stated views about contact which may be surmountable. However, some estimation of the strength of feeling regarding how much foster carers are able to ‘share’ a child psychologically would undoubtedly aid the process.

**Attitudes to care**

Often linked to the above characteristic, but again not necessarily a part of it, is the attitude of the child to care. There are those who are very accepting of foster care, even dependent on it, and wish to see it as being themselves included in their family. Others can be exceptionally accepting of it but hold onto a notion of care as being where they are away from their birth family. Yet other children can even positively reject it, having a very firm idea of being kept away from home. Foster carers will meet a range of children’s expressed attitudes towards care and birth parents. In terms of the rewards and costs of relationships for the foster carers it will depend on how they consider themselves and their role with
regard to looked after children. A parent who wishes to offer a substitute family in every sense of the word will experience difficulty with those children who are psychologically linked to their birth parents and not accepting of the fact of care. Similarly, foster carers who have a view of providing good quality ‘lodgings’ for children will experience difficulty when a child wishes to be attached to them. Such a child may have dispensed with their attachment towards their birth parents and be accepting of the alternative, only to be faced with a possible repetition of being ‘rejected’. Checklists and rating scales on child behaviour will provide useful information here.

Developmental level and progress
Children vary in their developmental maturity and the amount of energy that they put into dealing with the world at large. Carers who adhere philosophically to a conception of normative family development are likely to experience difficulties with children who cannot and do not ‘act their age’. Similarly, those who expect some developmental progress may find caring for such children unrewarding. The balance of development in the foster care relationship is different from the balance in other types of parenting relationship. As children develop, the path of appropriate expectations will vary from the usual patterns. Clear assessments of children’s possible developmental pathways need to be available to compare with the foster carers’ expectation of their own response to atypical pathways.

Case examples
In order to demonstrate the theoretical elements of this model in operation two case vignettes of an ‘unsuccessful’ and ‘successful’ matching are described.

Jill
Jill had lived with her mother until the age of three. As an infant she had been physically abused by her father who subsequently left home. After a while as a single parent her mother decided that matters had gone too far for her to cope and left Jill in the care of the social services department, making no further contact. Jill remained with her first ‘short-term’ foster placement for two years. In this placement Jill was considered to be a pleasant child and it was noticeable that the foster carers dealt with her as a young infant. At five years a permanent foster placement was found with the aim of leading to adoption.

In the early stages of placement the foster carers, Mr and Mrs X, described Jill as emotionally immature. She was a child who enjoyed a great deal of closeness to adults and relished any available attention. However, when offered attention she engaged in a great deal of meaningless play talk. She could not be engaged in any meaningful discussion about her own feelings and her conversation resembled that of a much younger child and in one sense was considered to be almost devoid of content.

Jill seemed to have little idea of what was positive or negative behaviour in that when she misbehaved she did not respond immediately to verbal correction. She needed to be dealt with in a very action-orientated manner in order to stop her from doing whatever it was she was engaged in. Even when her behaviour was halted in this way, she returned to it within a few moments. Mr and Mrs X found this difficult to deal with.

Mr and Mrs X considered that Jill was somewhat indiscriminate in the way in which she emotionally dealt with other adults. She would approach adults strange to her in a very friendly way and seem to assume instant closeness. She seemed to be very willing to accept Mr and Mrs X as parents and their home as being her home. The school reported that Jill’s progress was very slow academically and they commented that she seemed naïve and not quite able to keep up socially with the other children in her class.

The breakdown happened nine months into the placement. In the period prior to breakdown Mr and Mrs X indicated that they found much of Jill’s vacuous talk and attention-seeking very annoying. Mrs X said that she had assumed she would be
able to have some meaningful conversations with her child but Jill did not seem to be able to recognise how to deal with this. Mr and Mrs X went through a period of wondering whether Jill was keeping things to herself and so spent a great deal of time attempting to teach her about emotions. For a while they were angry, thinking that Jill was deliberately keeping matters to herself, then disappointed as they realised that Jill was simply unable to engage in any interaction involving emotional expressiveness. When they became aware of this they began to experience the attention that Jill sought as burdensome and could barely foresee a stage when she might spend time on her own. Mr and Mrs X considered that children should learn to respond to parents’ verbal commands and found it exasperating that this method of correction did not produce the good behaviour they expected. They felt that Jill’s behaviour towards other adults undermined their own need to be special to her and wondered whether or not in their view they were special people. Although Mr and Mrs X knew not to expect much in the way of academic progress, they were disappointed that Jill would not develop to any great extent emotionally and that her maturation would be slow. They came to the view that the pattern of daughter–parents relationship that they had envisaged was unlikely to develop. Because of growing disappointment and the anger it provoked, together with their awareness that they were expecting another outcome, Mr and Mrs X decided to terminate the placement. Jill was moved to another short-term home where her behaviour continued in the same way.

Jack

Jack lived with both his birth parents until the age of two, at which point his father left home and did not make much contact. Jack suffered physical abuse and neglect at the hands of his mother and at the age of five was received into care. Jack spent two years in a short-term foster placement and was then moved to his current foster carers. In this placement Jack is described as a boy who plods along at his own pace as long as someone is close by. He shows no great desire to engage others in any type of activity. He often takes himself off on his own and returns some little time later, clearly having no concept of the time involved. In terms of his expressiveness, Jack is seen as a boy who becomes easily upset and tearful about minor matters, but who has no great involvement with the wider issues around him. He appears to be rather unreactive to emotional issues going on for other individuals. Jack does not present with any behaviour problems, rather the opposite – he is compliant and can very easily take a back seat, placing little demands on people.

When he was seven, Jack’s father returned to the town in which he lived and asked to see his son. Jack now sees his father approximately once every two or three months. He enjoys this contact but does not talk a great deal about it. Jack is pleased to live with his foster carers, Mr and Mrs Y, and considers this his home. In terms of his overall maturity, he is seen as being rather immature and slow. His school work is poor and although he makes an effort and enjoys being there he can become upset if pushed too hard. It is likely that Jack will always need some special educational input.

Mr and Mrs Y describe themselves as a couple who simply get on with life and don’t expect much to happen to them. They see themselves as providing a home for Jack. In Mr Y’s words: ‘We just provide the fence and Jack walks around inside.’ Mr Y is seen very much as the disciplinarian in the home and makes a point of ensuring that he is aware of what Jack is doing, even though he knows that he is complying. There is a sense in which Mr and Mrs Y are engaged in their own activities, including Jack but in a way which does not focus on him. Jack’s relationship with his birth father does not cause his foster carers any difficulties and they are aware that Jack’s father is unlikely to play any significant part with regard to the boy’s care in future years. As Mr and Mrs Y observe Jack developing in a slow, ponderous way, they foresee that he is likely to remain
with them for some time and wonder whether it would be appropriate for them to adopt him – a decision which they would have to make as Jack is not the sort of boy who would wish to be fully engaged in this.

Both these cases demonstrate that information was present beforehand that could have aided the placement process. The elucidation of this information by systematic and psychometric means would have proved cost effective and efficient in identifying the most likely outcome for each child.

**Conclusion and summary**

A model for considering the interaction between a child and a foster carer has been suggested that uses Behavioural Exchange as a theoretical base. This model is in part based on a view of the child requiring a foster placement possessing needs that are not usually encountered in the typical process of child development. It is a view which rests on the unfortunate fact that, as a result of adversity, some children suffer damage to their development process, which, as a consequence is unlikely to follow typical pathways. The model is also based on a premise that is counter to popular culture and myth, namely that if children are well cared for they will overcome disadvantage and progress in common and acceptable ways. It is considered that children in looked after situations are likely to have complex needs and that they will remain that way throughout childhood. On the positive side, however, the model does suggest that for every difficult child behaviour it is possible to identify parental behaviours within the ‘normal range’ that are ultimately helpful to the child. The obvious task is to find those parents who naturally exhibit those behaviours, attitudes and expectations that will mesh interactionally with the child’s presentation. The suggestion is that by focusing on the ‘here and now’ interaction a more appropriate and worthwhile matching will result – a matching that rests on objective assessments rather than on purely subjective appraisals. The elements contributed by the child can be specified by checklists and rating scales, while the foster carer elements can be identified via attitudinal and attributional questionnaires that relate directly to the child’s behaviour. Clearly the current need is for research focusing on the establishment of a set of measures which offer a descriptive profile of foster carers’ preferred child management style and their attitudes to problems encountered on placements. Once such measures are available it would then be possible to initially study ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ placements retrospectively by comparing foster carer behaviour with measures of child behaviour. This would begin to elucidate the nature and process of helpful versus unhelpful matching. Ultimately such work would then look at the issue prospectively and begin to follow the paths of particular child–foster carer combinations. The final stage would be to suggest, on the basis of data obtained from an objective assessment, whether a particular foster care matching would be in the long term beneficial to the child and of course the foster carers. This is a goal that should have some priority in our efforts to ensure that the durability and benefits of foster placements are maximised.

**References**


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