The tangible and intangible rewards of fostering for carers

Sandra Butler and Marian Charles discuss findings from a small-scale research project examining the dynamics involved in substitute family placements for young people, and assessing the processes demonstrated in fostering breakdowns in terms of the interactions, negotiations and adjustments between the respective parties over time. While briefly exploring carers’ expectations of tangible rewards from these experiences, the authors concentrate on the powerful and pervasive effects of intangible rewards. These relate to carers’ beliefs that love and care would be reciprocated, that young people would express gratitude, and that they would change sufficiently to fit into their substitute family. Recognising that tangible rewards alone are insufficient to retain carers’ valuable services and resources on any long-term basis, the article concludes with suggestions for attending to intangible rewards as a means of maintaining carers’ role satisfaction through a crucial sense of a ‘job well done’.

Introduction

Recent publications have emphasised a worrying lack of consistency in the quality and structures of local authority fostering services (SSI, 1996; ADSS, 1997; Waterhouse, 1997). Available national research concerning local authorities’ financial investment and human resource deployment in the recruitment and retention of foster carers reveals a mixed picture. Eighty per cent of authorities (NFCA, 1997) have experienced an overall increase or no change in carer numbers, and 57 per cent indicated few difficulties in retaining carers. It is unclear how these figures match with apparently conflicting information regarding lack of placement choice and the serious shortage of carers for young people (SSI, 1996; NFCA, 1997). However, in the NFCA (1997) survey, only 51 per cent of respondents provided statistics of carer recruitment and those ceasing fostering due to the comparatively limited use and accessibility of management information systems, which could inform future placement practice and recruitment approaches. Amid these complexities, the importance of financial renumeration in the professionalisation of fostering services has been emphasised (Bebbington and Miles, 1990; Chamberlain et al., 1992), although payment levels still do not approach the real market value of what is largely seen as women’s work (Smith, 1988). This article extends such thinking by moving beyond monetary considerations into the realms of carers’ motivations, an area attracting little research attention (NFCA, 1997) in spite of its potential significance in retaining carers in the system.

Available studies (Fanshel, 1966; Kay, 1966; Dando and Minty, 1987) suggest that people’s key motivations for fostering are desires to parent a child and enhance their own quality of family life, alongside an identification with disadvantaged children resulting from personal experience. With these factors in mind, this paper seeks to relate the satisfactions derived from fostering – whether material or psychological – to some findings from our small-scale exploratory research project (Butler and Charles, 1997). The research focused on the dynamics involved in foster placement disruption for young people via the interactions, negotiations and adjustments between the parties over time. Our primary objective was to examine the critical points contributing to an increase in young people’s vulnerability to placement breakdown and subsequent crises such as homelessness. Information about fostering policies and resources was gathered from 16 local authorities. In addition, 40 voluntary organisations working with

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young people, of whom 18 (45 per cent) responded, received a questionnaire designed to elicit information about young people in crisis and innovatory service responses.

Against this backcloth, a small sample of 11 self-selecting young people and foster carers with experience of placement disruption were interviewed. They expressed their thoughts, feelings and insights about the factors impacting on the placement’s life and contributing to its demise. We aimed to elicit their perceptions, interpretations of events and evaluations of placement efficacy. Respondents were drawn from two of the 16 local authorities plus a voluntary housing project for young people. The six carers, all white, were in receipt of enhanced payments and had undertaken preparatory training emphasising specialist adolescent placements. The five young people, aged 16–20 years, included one white female and one African-Caribbean male. Respondents discussed their collective experience of 15 placements (covering respite, short-term, long-term and contract care), ranging in duration from one week to six years, all of which came to unplanned endings during adolescence. Young people’s experiences of placements were of longer duration than the carers, who had managed eight placements over a maximum period of 18 months. In acknowledging the potential influence of breakdown upon perceptions, respondents came with an average six-month time lapse since disruption. Taped two-hour interviews, shaped by a semi-structured schedule, were conducted at the respondents’ chosen venue and then fully transcribed. Questions focused on:

- placement preparation;
- perceptions during the placement of young people’s identity development, expectations of all parties, communication patterns and family power dynamics, areas of difficulty and the social workers’ role;
- placement crisis and disruption;
- the post-breakdown period, coping strategies utilised and support services available.

Trinder’s (1996) critical review of contemporary social work research demonstrates that most recent child care studies have concentrated on outcome measures. In contrast, our research examined why placement disruption was occurring in terms of how the process affected the end results. Given the depth and richness of the data, we attempted to conceptualise users’ understandings of what was going on for them throughout placements. Data analysis pinpointed recurring themes and patterns as well as instances of difference within and across the carers’ and young people’s groups. However, the material to be presented should be set alongside evidence of good fostering practice and successful placement outcomes (Cautley, 1980; Triseliotis et al, 1995) which clearly affect carers’ motivations and levels of satisfaction. We do not aim to generalise from these findings; the users’ and carers’ perceptions cited here would need to be tested further against those who have experienced ‘successful’, as well as disrupted, placements. Nevertheless, we aim to locate our findings within the context of previous research, with a view to identifying corroborative evidence and areas representing significant new developments.

Emergent patterns from the data related to foster carers’ hopes of tangible and intangible rewards; these held varying degrees of significance but contrasted sharply with young people’s limited expectations of substitute care. Tangible and intangible rewards are qualitatively different. The former are more readily identifiable, demonstrable and measurable, while the latter refer to internal, psychological and attitudinal components affecting carers’ behaviour and confidence in their parenting skills. After an initial review of tangible rewards, this paper is weighted towards consideration of anticipated intangible rewards from the carers’ perspective, seen to derive from the young people themselves and having far greater impact. The second part of our analysis examines the
effects of expected intangible rewards on carers’ role satisfaction. We conclude with a critical appreciation of how these patterns might be used to generate a realistic picture of the traumas involved in substitute care with a view to retaining carers’ valuable services.

Tangible rewards
The carers defined tangible rewards in terms of financial and practical provision, preparation for placements, training and social work support. Likewise, Bebbington and Miles (1990) pinpointed the mechanisms for retaining carers in the system through individual and group support, financial recompense and respite care. For these carers, money was something of a poisoned chalice; they wanted financial benefits but recognised that being paid to parent appeared fundamentally at odds with normative societal values about the association between parenting and natural love. The role of fostering as offering ‘love on the job’ was recognised by both young people and carers:

*She deeply had this feeling still that I was doing it for the money. I said: ‘I’m getting paid to look after and help you, not be your servant.’*

While payment was not a priority for discussion, carers cited practical items such as increased allowances, money to replace damaged articles or help with transport as areas requiring improvement by local authorities. These comments, reinforced by Sellick (1992), highlight the need for efficient payment systems and swift damage compensation as ways of gaining carers’ respect. However, on current evidence, the link between recruitment of carers and payment levels is tenuous. Studies (Bebbington and Miles, 1990; Chamberlain *et al*, 1992) indicate that well-paid, trained and supported carers are less likely to cease fostering, while local authorities paying the lowest fostering allowances experience the greatest problems in recruiting and retaining carers (Waterhouse, 1997). However, the Audit Commission (1994) has emphasised how training and support are more significant for the recruitment, retention and quality of carers than payment levels. Likewise, the SSI (1996) found that inadequate provision of support, alongside rewards or incentives, have contributed to an overall foster carer shortage. These views are echoed in other recent publications (Berridge, 1996; NFCA, 1997) which recognise remuneration as one of various measures necessary to improve carers’ status.

The majority of these carers considered that they had been adequately prepared for their fostering role. They appreciated receiving full information about young people, particularly if they posed potential risks to their own children. This tangible reward was peppered by concern about the absence of mechanisms to identify and transfer information from one fostering situation to another, thus impeding opportunities for young people to receive appropriate help:

*We both felt very strongly there was no co-ordination, no sense of ‘We’ve had this situation with A [young person], but we need to take what we’ve learned to the next placement so that overall we are making progress.’*

This message is reinforced by the UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care which lists continuity and consistency in information for carers as one of its principles in developing national foster care standards (NFCA, 1997a). There were discrepancies, however, between carers’ beliefs about the centrality of sound preparation, their internalisation that ‘love would be enough’, and the conscious reality that specific advice and supportive networks were essential. This was exacerbated by the problem-focused nature of their own preparatory training which had emphasised behavioural difficulties and their management: ‘normal naughtiness and stroppiness’. Such an approach took little account of young people’s emotional baggage and strengths, or offered an holistic view of their past history with its consequent implications for carers parenting non-birth adolescents.
Finally, carers valued the amount, type and intensity of social work support, where trusting relationships had been established. Several carers acknowledged that they had embarked on their fostering careers with jaundiced, prejudiced perceptions of social workers. These views changed during their contact with workers, although, in common with other studies, expectations of children’s social workers were low (Ramsay, 1996; Sellick, 1996; SSI, 1996). The valued qualities, derived from the relationship with their own social worker, were not extrapolated or applied to social work generally. While the personal relationship was vital to the fostering process, this was decontextualised with social work actions standing alone, rather than representing organisational and professional behaviour. The stereotype of social workers, in effect, remained intact, as in ‘I haven’t got a lot of time for social workers but our social worker, she’s great’ (authors’ emphasis).

Before the placement, some carers thought they ‘knew better’ than social workers and expected to ‘go it alone’. However, they came to appreciate opportunities to share their feelings, discuss difficulties and receive advice, especially when their worker offered a prompt response, respected their individual and familial needs, and maintained contact after placement endings. These findings concur with Sellick (1992), whose investigation into short-term care revealed a need for regular and out-of-hours consultation and information, recognition of carers’ work, and the provision of respite and specialist support. More specifically, O’Hara (1986, 1991) found that social workers who demonstrated a commitment to carers, alongside listening skills, reliability and trustworthiness, were valued. In Triseliotis et al’s (1995) view, support maximises carers’ retention, minimises costs and prevents disruption.

**Intangible rewards**

Carers were not substantially or emotionally affected by these tangible rewards, compared with the powerful and pervasive effects of anticipated incentives rooted in psychological components.

Three elements are discernible in carers’ hopes for intangible rewards. The first relates to their expectations of reciprocity of love and emotional attachment between young people and themselves. Quite simply, carers believed that young people would flourish and respond to the love and care offered. They saw themselves as providing a ‘decent home, a normal family’, believing that fostering might be hard work but eventually ‘loving and supporting would be enough to see us through’. Their emotional investment in young people was evident in their desire that they would become full family members:

> I wanted them to become part of my life. I was really involved. I was expecting to take on somebody that would end up as part of our family.

Secondly, in return for the love and care available, most carers believed that young people would express gratitude. This was grounded in their wish to be valued and appreciated as ‘parents’, with home being a haven to which return was always possible:

> Providing a roof, food and all the rest might keep the wolf away from the door but it’s not going to bring about a well-balanced adult. It’s only scratching the surface. I wasn’t interested in doing that . . . in having a difficult lodger. I wanted something back.

Finally, carers assumed that young people would change sufficiently to fit into their family. Unfortunately, the onus to become part of the new family rested with the young person rather than the family adapting to include someone with a different background and world view. Little attention was devoted to the reality that young people might well lack the skills to achieve this, being particularly unaware of unwritten family rules and expectations:

> I thought ‘She’s had a bad start. Given a nice environment and a loving family she would change.’
Despite earlier information about young people’s behaviour, their history or previous difficulties, some carers anticipated that these would miraculously evaporate once in their care; young people would conform to their family system and behave ‘normally’. Behaviourally and attitudinally, carers wanted their fostered adolescents to absorb the family image on offer. Basing their notions of equity on the available material conditions within the foster home, carers believed they were treating young people as their own.

The intricacies of these anticipated intangible rewards impacted on carers’ abilities to sustain placements once these expectations were thwarted.

Effects of expectations of intangible rewards on foster carers’ role satisfaction

While deriving some tangible rewards from fostering, carers were more preoccupied with intangible rewards. The consequences of not receiving these were enormous: (1) in terms of carers’ lack of role satisfaction; (2) in their externalisation of ‘hurt’; (3) in perceptions of their own inability to effect significant change in young people’s lives; (4) in their attitudes towards birth parents; and (5) in their images of young people as potential or actual sources of threat to their birth children or the entire family unit. These factors emerged as highly significant for decisions as to whether or not to continue with fostering activities, and embellish previous research findings concerning the impact of placement disruption (Aldgate and Hawley, 1986; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987).

1. Deterioration in carers’ role satisfaction.

When placements ended prematurely, carers were locked into negative interpretations of the placement’s effects on themselves and others. Any positive aspects were rarely articulated, to the extent that their affection and attachment to the young people were outweighed by their memories of difficult periods of living together. The absence of role satisfaction was defined as ‘personal suffering’, the impact of which telescoped carers’ energies into coping with their own emotions and awareness of their dented parental images:

We went at it like a bull at a gate and got a real bad dose. We’ve suffered and want to come out of the system.

As a result, their capacity to empathise with the young person’s position was limited. While not wanting to blame the young person for the placement’s negative outcome, carers did not wish to shoulder this burden themselves. This ambivalence was reflected in their statements:

It deflated my image. I didn’t feel that we’d achieved the slightest thing. It ain’t her fault she’s in the predicament she’s in. She doesn’t help herself.

Verbally, these carers expressed low expectations of rewards, yet emotionally still anticipated some positive feedback in order to balance out the placement’s difficult aspects. They experienced tremendous failure and guilt, both towards themselves and the young people. There was no sense of a ‘job well done’. Instead carers were faced with overpowering sensations of grief and relief:

Not having hassle, aggravation and intimidation anymore . . . There was also a very deep mourning for her and for the relationship . . . The grief was very real for me and I missed her.

This finding complements Aldgate and Hawley’s (1986) and Berridge and Cleaver’s (1987) recognition of carers’ pain, sadness and isolation several years after placement breakdown.

Where there was no contact post disruption, the carers wanted to seek out or hoped for current information about the young person, but this was a contradictory position to hold. Their desire was prompted by a genuine wish to learn about the young people’s welfare and, paradoxically, by their own need to acquire facts, validating their earlier actions:
If she’s found somewhere she wants to be and she’s happy, I will be happy for her. If she’s found somewhere as bad as what she experienced with us, then I will feel sorry for her, but I will also feel better in myself because she can’t maintain relationships.

Available details, confirming their perceptions, eased their conscience about failing the young person and mitigated the damage to their parental self-image. Certain carers ‘saved face’ by labelling the specific young person in their care as ‘mentally disturbed’ and needing ‘professional treatment’, well beyond the bounds of what they or any parent could reasonably be expected to provide.

2. Externalisation of ‘hurt’
The ‘hurt’ endured when parenting efforts went unrewarded was managed through the process of externalisation, rather than examining the potential contribution of the family’s interactional patterns. Blame was principally targeted at social services departments which served as convenient butts for projected anger and distress. Some protected their self-image by viewing themselves as victims of statutory sector actions. For example, out-of-hours services were cited as being difficult to access and offering inadequate responses, symbolising the devaluation of their efforts by distant unknown workers. In addition, some ‘hurt’ was projected onto the young people’s social workers whose perceived insubstantial training and insufficient supply of comprehensive information were identified as factors contributing to placement difficulties. Significantly, the carers protected their fostering workers from such criticisms, believing that their efforts were appreciated by these professional staff with whom they considered they had established more equitable partnerships. Nevertheless, this validation was not enough to counteract the low level of role satisfaction. The intangible rewards, vital for carers’ sustenance and continuation in the fostering role, needed to come directly from the young people.

3. Inability to effect significant change
The lack of reward linked closely with carers’ perceptions of their inability to effect meaningful change in young people’s lives. Even where carers recognised their positive contributions to young people’s development, or where reciprocal relationships had been cultivated, this provided inadequate gratification to retain them as fostering resources. So acute was their disillusionment, carers concluded that ultimately they made little difference to young people’s lives, whatever level of care was provided:

I’m never gonna be able to substitute what they have lost or what they didn’t have.

This thinking was frequently compounded by limited opportunity or encouragement for continuing contact post disruption. This concurs with Strover’s (1996/7) findings about placement endings where there was a lack of follow-up information and social work interest. With no chance to nurture or further interdependent relationships, carers were not privileged to witness the young people drawing on the range of skills developed in foster care, which aided their survival in independent living situations. The impediments to carers recognising their achievements during the placement were rooted in their growing realisation that the high expectations associated with intangible rewards would remain unmet. Placements confronted carers with the fragility of their assumption about love conquering all. Most significantly, young people did not change to ‘fit’ into their family in the explicit ways anticipated. When the hoped-for conformity failed to materialise, young people were described as ‘knowing how to play the system’, ‘playing on your good nature’ and ‘getting you over a barrel’. Hence aspects of behaviour were often interpreted as a young person deliberately not making an effort:

She spoilt our holiday doing what she wanted to do all the time. She would never put herself out.
Being overwhelmingly concerned with concrete or tangible behavioural evidence, carers overlooked instances, often subtle, of the young people’s affiliation with their substitute family. In contrast, young people gave clear examples of identification with their carers’ values and lifestyle, respecting them as positive role models for resolving conflicts without resorting to violence. They had learnt to manage emotions within a family setting, watching anger be expressed without relationships being permanently damaged.

4. Attitudes towards birth parents
The lack of degree of fit between expectations and reality led carers to question the birth families’ role. Attitudes towards birth parents were highly complex and warrant more detailed attention, beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes here, verbally, carers recognised young people’s family heritage to some degree, but this seemed to function purely on an intellectual level. Birth parents were viewed as a hindrance – unhelpful and problematic – hampering young people’s capacity to draw on opportunities for betterment not feasible in their birth families:

*It was the love and the need they had for their families that entrapped them.*

Carers became angry with birth parents over their perceived abdication of responsibility for their children, especially when feeling they were ‘picking up the pieces’ following parental failure to keep arranged visits or earlier promises. Contact raised numerous emotions around appropriate parenting and substitute family care, triggering perceptions of rivalry and challenges to carers’ parental images:

*It made me feel I wasn’t the surrogate parent that I wanted to believe I was.*

This suggests that carers are motivated towards ‘exclusive’ models of fostering (Holman, 1980) in which parents are preferably uninvolved (George, 1970; Adamson, 1973). In contrast, research (Weinstein, 1960; Jenkins, 1969; Thorpe, 1974) consistently indicates that children’s well-being is enhanced by ‘inclusive’ fostering arrangements (Holman, 1980) which encourage birth family contact, a principle underpinning the Children Act 1989. This shift towards inclusivity may be one reason behind some carers ceasing to foster as it impacts upon motivations associated with the ‘exclusive’ model.

Recognising the overriding strength of ties with birth families led carers to examine their role, the degree of attachment between them and young people and the extent to which individual change could be achieved:

*They wanted . . . complete devotion from you. They still wanted these ties with the old family that were screwing them up.*

Paradoxically, acknowledgement of the emotional centrality of their own families was not transferred or used to empathise with the young person’s situation. Once again, these tenuous reciprocal attachments inhibited not only carers’ understanding of young people’s need to integrate all the different parts of their lives, but also their potential to deal effectively with the lack of intangible rewards and hence avoid leaving the fostering system.

5. Effects on carers’ own families
This probing of the quality of attachment between themselves and young people became more sharply drawn when carers felt personally threatened or perceived other family members, especially younger children, to be endangered by young people’s behaviour. Carers experienced emotional, physical, and/or sexual intimidation. In anticipating rewards associated with emotional connection and a sense of belonging, carers were often ill prepared for the imbalance between the young person’s chronological age and her or his emotional stage of development. Temper tantrums and constant nurturance needs were not expected from adolescents, even where carers identified cognitively that their young person
functioned at pre-school age. Young people’s emotional neediness left carers drained, exhausted, and increasingly open to interpreting behaviour negatively:

[X] was bleeding me dry. We thought, naively in hindsight, that loving and supporting her might be enough. [X] just took more and more of it. This was a great game, she just played with our emotions.

This finding concurs with Levine’s (1990) perspective that carers’ nurturance rubs salt into unhealed wounds, where, yearning to take advantage of the love and affection offered, young people realise that the very act of comfort increases the pain associated with the absence of birth parental love. This traps them into betraying either their birth parents or their own wants and needs. In more extreme circumstances, carers were unable to respond to these basic nurturing needs, including physical affection. For one couple, their focus became one of protecting the ‘threatened’ male carer from allegations of sexual abuse, where the foster daughter’s overtures of demonstrative affection were regarded as evidence of sexually ‘provocative’ behaviour and were subsequently handled subversively through excuses to avoid any physical contact.

Once placements became stressful, contrary to Pugh’s (1996) findings, carers grew seriously concerned about potential risks to their own children. The strength of their own emotional attachments outweighed logical and sometimes compassionate thinking about a young person’s position. Young people’s power and influence were heightened when carers saw them developing as negative role models for their own children through their tales of burglary and theft. The adults, however, experienced such stories as challenges to familial moral codes and normative societal values. Threats against younger children were taken literally rather than interpreted as sibling rivalry or a desire to have the carer’s sole attention:

She hated [A] . . . she wished she could kill her. There were lots of entries like that in her diary.

A pattern of initially affectionate relationships with birth children often developed, which seduced carers into believing they were moving towards the attainment of some of the hoped-for intangible rewards. Indeed, birth children were non-threatening sources of acceptance, affection and nurturance for young people. However, when these relationships underwent emotional shifts, this challenged the image of cohesive family life. Such changes were regarded as ‘threats’ rather than as different stages in relationships between siblings of dissimilar ages:

She would go into [B’s] bedroom, she would sit, talk and cuddle her. They were great to begin with . . . the novelty wore off and she was ‘just a spoil little brat who gets up my nose’.

What emerges then is a complex interplay between the deterioration of carers’ role satisfaction and the increasing permeability of their own family to a range of perceived hazards. Subtly and incrementally, risks to birth children increased, there was an absence of intrinsic rewards for their parenting efforts and their own searching questions about the quality of mutual attachments with the young people intensified. While carers could identify how placements had developed their inner strengths, they were not prepared to ‘sacrifice’ their own family, either in the short term for the survival of placements or in the long term as a fostering resource:

I never expected the kid to go down on bended knee and say ‘Thank you’, but I did expect after six months’ hard work to start seeing light at the end of the tunnel.

When these rewards did not materialise and placements disrupted, carers experienced role confusion due to their perceived inability to effect significant change in young people’s lives. Ultimately, their feelings of threat to
themselves, their children and their family pushed them into leaving the fostering system.

Conclusion
This article has presented an overview of foster carers’ perceptions of the tangible and intangible rewards permeating placements, their subsequent attitudes to disruption and their future as carers. In our sample, carers managed their disillusionment with the role by leaving the system. Tangible rewards alone, irrespective of quality or quantity, were insufficient to retain their valuable resources on any long-term basis. This is especially disconcerting given previous recognition of the need to retain experienced and resourceful carers (Smith, 1986). Indeed, 60 per cent of carers in Berridge and Cleaver’s (1987) study had been fostering for under a year, while a survey of London boroughs revealed that 20 to 25 per cent of carers were ‘lost’ annually (NFCA, 1997).

Within the context of developing national foster care standards, and while not losing sight of tangible rewards, our findings imply the need for fostering workers to attend to intangible rewards in their efforts to maintain carers in the system. If these carers thought they were adequately prepared and trained, how and why did they come to hold such unrealistic expectations? Part of the answer lies in acknowledging the complex interplay between tangible and intangible rewards. Whatever the nature of preparation, training and support structures, the psychological benefits, the ‘What’s in it for me?’ elements of the role, need teasing out and linking to what is reasonably achievable with damaged young people, thus reducing the potential for carers’ attributions of threat, failure and guilt.

Three significant implications for fostering practice arise out of this emphasis on intangible rewards. First, workers need to create an atmosphere conducive to carers recognising and articulating their emotional needs. Given societal discouragement of emotional expression, workers could enable carers to appreciate ‘buried’ expectations of intangible rewards and their impact on placements’ progress and outcomes. Significantly, carers whom we interviewed talked persistently about their emotional requisites. However, when asked to identify means to better their lot as carers, without exception, they focused on practical measures, ignoring the role’s emotional aspect and their quest for intangible rewards. Their self-defined needs were gauged in terms of necessary physical resources. In common with other studies (Aldgate and Hawley, 1986; Berridge and Cleaver, 1987), they were denied the right to analyse thoroughly their role difficulties and responses to the disruption process.

Secondly, social workers could facilitate carers’ exploration of the match between their expectations of intangible rewards and the assessment of what is realistically possible during a placement. Emphasis on small, currently unnoticed steps, which represent young people’s understanding of placement strengths, would counterbalance carers’ perceptions of progress, reducing their inability ‘to tolerate the absence of quick returns’ (Triseliotis, 1995, p 27). Locating the period and duration of the fostering episode within the individual’s lifespan and experiences would enhance carers’ understanding, clarifying whether dramatic change was feasible or if their task was one of ‘damage limitation’. A realistic picture of the degree of likely reward would be established, enabling more accurate evaluations of carers’ achievements in the post-disruption phase.

Thirdly, regardless of the circumstances of placement endings, consideration should be given to some form of continuing contact between carers and young people. This would help reduce carers’ sense of failure, improve their role satisfaction, and provide young people with an additional source of support and continuity. Contact would increase the likelihood of affectionate ties being enhanced or restored, minimising the potentially detrimental effects of placement disruption. Kosenen’s (1994) review of looked after children’s sibling relationships revealed a
paucity of information about the nature of these filial bonds. Likewise, little is known about the meaning of relationships between fostered young people and carers’ own birth children. Our findings suggest these links are fundamentally important to young people in the development of their life-long relationships. Post-placement contact would enable significant attachments to be maintained, even where it is impossible for the respective parties to live in the same household.

Selection, preparation and training of carers are undoubtedly costly exercises with no guarantee that the number and quality of recruited carers will match the organisation’s expenditure of time and effort. Our findings indicate a need to maintain resourceful and experienced carers through recognising and managing the interlocking nature of tangible and intangible rewards. Carers may then experience a crucial sense of a ‘job well done’, within the parameters of a difficult and demanding role.

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