In this article,* David Berridge summarises the main conclusions of the latest research overview in the Government’s Messages from Research series. The overview, Fostering Now, written by Ian Sinclair, includes findings from 16 studies.

The Government’s Messages from Research series has been an effective way of summarising results from key studies and linking findings with current practice issues. The latest in the series is concerned with foster care, written by Ian Sinclair.

Much has changed in the field of foster care compared with eight years ago, when this author reviewed it. There is now much more research evidence and foster care, at long last, is given greater professional attention. However, many key challenges remain. For example, there are too few foster carers, resulting in inadequate placement choice. The decrease in residential care has meant that children who are fostered now present greater difficulties. In addition, the increasing professionalisation of foster care brings challenges associated with the circumstances of carers and their relationships with social services and other workers.

Fostering Now identifies four main cross-cutting themes from the 16 studies included in the overview:

1. Foster care has been seen too often as separate and it needs to develop in the context of family support, adoption and other services. Therefore, greater integration is needed.

2. More account should be taken of children’s views. Like the rest of us, children do not always know what is best for them and listening to children does not mean that we should always do what they want. However, the studies reveal that children want their views to be taken seriously; they want a normal family life without conflict between their birth and foster families; they want the same opportunities that other children have; and they do not want to be made to feel uncomfortable by being singled out, such as at school.

3. There is a continuing need for research and development. Knowledge about effective foster care is increasing but this is not a one-off exercise. The spotlight needs to remain on foster care now that it has finally been turned in its direction.

4. Support for foster care needs to be improved. Agencies must realise that fostering is a difficult task and, if carers are to be recruited and retained, their own needs must be addressed.

Adversities in childhood

Fostering is complex because of the range and extent of adversities children have faced before separation from home. Most have been abused, which leads to problems in development, behaviour and in forming trusting relationships with others. Many have experienced domestic violence, instability and neglect. Behavioural problems exacerbate other difficulties.

Foster children have varying care careers and the studies demonstrated that leaving foster care is often problematic. Return home is sometimes ill-judged and occurs despite erratic parenting and lack of change in the home situation.

The overview states:

Longer-staying children who returned home at any stage were more likely to be re-abused, less likely to be rated as doing

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well at school and more likely to display a wide variety of difficult behaviours . . . (Sinclair, 2005, p 29)

Variable support to parents
Support to parents after return is variable and, illogically, can be less than that offered to the foster carers. Some young children had several unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation with negative consequences. Moves to ‘independence’ often happened too soon and before the young person was ready. Though it could provide a form of security, for most children the care system was unable to offer a long-term, stable alternative to their own family. Few stayed with their foster carers after the age of 18.

Despite the many positives, foster care by relatives and friends also had a number of problems. For example, relative carers were poorer than those who were unrelated, they were less highly educated, had lower remuneration from social services and received less support and training. Disagreements with birth parents were not uncommon. They were also judged to have poorer parenting skills.

Nonetheless, placements with relatives tended to last longer than other fosterings. Overall, the researchers’ measurements of the outcomes of different types of placements showed little difference between placements with relatives and friends and those with unrelated carers.

Foster children involved in the research studies voiced five main requirements from fostering:

1. Normality – fostering should be as ‘normal’ as possible. For example, arriving at school in a taxi could be a source of embarrassment.

2. Family care – to feel that they belonged in the foster home and that they were treated the same as other children: ‘They valued treats, opportunities for their hobbies and, in most cases, a room of their own’ (Sinclair, 2005, p 50).

3. Respect for their origins – children had different opinions about the relationships they wanted with their birth families and with whom they wanted to be in touch. These views should be respected.

4. Linked to the above, children wanted greater attention paid to their views and to have some influence over future plans.

5. Future opportunity – foster children mainly had the same aspirations for their future as other children: to do well at school, get a good job, have a happy family and children. Foster care should provide a springboard to get their lives back on track and provide an opportunity for these achievements, which most take for granted.

The report discusses what is required from foster care to provide successful outcomes. The provision of ‘good enough’ parenting is important, both in terms of nurturing as well as reasonable and effective boundaries. Good attachments need to be developed and supported. School is significant and good educational experiences and achievements should be supported. A sense of identity is also key and children should be encouraged in this. In addition, effort should be directed towards supporting positive friendships and in the development of skills and interests. Furthermore, there should be some continuity between what happens in foster care and what follows – for example, attitudes to schooling should not change dramatically on return home.

To achieve this, the process of making placements is important. However, the studies found that children received different levels of preparation from social workers. The question of relationships between siblings received inadequate attention. There were also difficulties in creating an adequate educational plan, particularly when children were educated in a different authority from their own. All of this could be hampered by the lack of choice; typically any choice at all was available in less than one-third of placements. Too often, placements arise as emergencies and rational decision-making is jeopardised by a sense of crisis. Placements that were hurried were more likely to fail. Waiting too long in initial placements that were intended to be temporary caused problems for carers.
Regarding parenting style, the report summarises:

_In general, foster carers who provided ‘authoritative’, ‘responsive’ and encouraging parenting were less likely to experience [placement] breakdowns._ (Sinclair, 2005, p 80)

In contrast to what has been assumed, there was no clear link between the presence of other children in the fostering household and placement outcomes. About half of children in the studies had at least weekly contact with one or more family member. Children and parents, and their relationships, were important to one another. However, contact could be distressing for children and, if mismanaged, harmful. The overall conclusion is that we should have a more differentiated view about contact with different people. We should also be clear about its purpose.

School was important for foster children in the studies. It influenced their sense of self-esteem. It could be a venue to keep in touch with previous friends and to make new contacts. They had to cope at school with the stigma of being in care. Many children experienced a lot of educational disruption before they entered care and so progress could be a struggle. Those who did very well at school often had continuing support from a local authority, but the low-achievers did not. Most entered uninspiring, routine jobs.

**Carer recruitment**

One study, undertaken in Scotland, focused on foster carer recruitment and attention. It concluded that recruitment was too often poorly planned, inadequately targeted and failed to provide a positive, yet accurate, view of fostering.

For it to be more successful, fostering recruitment should be based on good, local knowledge and its fostering needs. A positive local image of foster care needs to be developed, including working with local media. Experienced carers and young people should be involved in order to help provide a realistic and convincing account. The system to respond to enquiries should be well organised and include follow-ups visits where required. Recruitment should be continuous rather than reliant on one-off campaigns. Neighbouring authorities should also collaborate to avoid unnecessary duplication.

The same study found that fewer carers were leaving than might have been expected (about 10 per cent a year). Low turnover was more likely to exist where support was targeted to their particular family situation – for example, working patterns and responsibilities. Regular social work visits, contact with other carers and adequate remuneration were important.

**Carers’ stresses**

The particular stresses expressed by carers should be addressed, such as the need for short breaks or after-hours services. Key events, such as placement breakdown or allegations, need to be responded to promptly, efficiently and sensitively. Overall, carers should feel part of a team. Whatever its other merits, training for carers had no simple, direct link with improved child outcomes. The studies did not provide evidence that any particular organisational structure for fostering services produced better outcomes.

**Conclusion**

It is encouraging that foster care is now recognised as an important service for children living away from home. No longer are carers seen merely as well-intentioned volunteers providing for young, unproblematic, deprived children. The task and expectations are greater and research findings, such as these, have an important role in raising standards and providing improved experiences for children, families and carers alike.

**References**

Sinclair I, _Fostering Now: Messages from research_, London: Jessica Kingsley, 2005

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