

Men as foster carers A neglected resource?

In this paper, **Robbie Gilligan** sets out to highlight questions about the role and experiences of men as foster carers in fostering couples.¹ The sparse literature relevant to the topic is reviewed; some of the therapeutic and practical reasons for the significance of the man's role in foster care are considered; findings from a small exploratory study of male foster carers and their role are presented; and certain policy implications arising are discussed. The author has been a foster carer himself.

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How male foster carers have been viewed within the field of foster care

A review of the fostering literature gives two clear messages: the paucity of explicit references to men as foster carers, and their apparent marginality in the eyes of agencies and social workers. Interestingly, this relative neglect of men as foster carers seems to mirror a comparable lack of attention to men as fathers and clients within the wider child protection and welfare system (O'Hagan, 1997; Daniel and Taylor, 1999).

Only a small number of studies (mostly US) have addressed the role of men as foster carers. Cautley (1980, p 255) lamented the tendency to ignore the foster father in fostering agencies. She suggested that the foster father is actually an 'extremely important participant in foster care'. Based on her US research on the progress of 145 new foster carers, she suggested that foster fathers can be key sources of information for social workers and agencies. They may give information in initial interviews that is more predictive of ultimate placement outcome and, later on, possibly give clear clues which can signal a placement which is in jeopardy. Cautley also found

that the more involved the foster father was in joint and mutually enjoyable activities with the foster child 'the more likely the placement was to work out well' (p 255). In an earlier US study of foster carers, Fanshel (1966) also decried any tendency to leave foster fathers 'on the periphery of the caseworker's concerns' (p 165). He argued that as foster care increasingly served children with greater emotional disturbance, it was essential that foster fathers play their part in the child's care and treatment. The need for foster care professionals to re-evaluate their attitude to the male foster carer and their potential contribution was also highlighted in a further US study. Davids (1973) saw foster fathers as being engaged in leisure activities and being good companions and adult models for foster boys (he makes no mention of foster girls!). On the basis of their research on long-term foster care in England, Rowe *et al* (1984) argued that the role of foster fathers is 'often undervalued' despite their 'playing a most important role in the foster child's life' (p 238). Swan (1997), in her Canadian study of providing foster care for sexually abused girls, highlights as central the role of the male carer. Making a similar point from a British perspective, Triseliotis *et al* (1995) argue that helping (mainly) female foster children to recover from sexual abuse is not only 'women's work' (p 58) – there is a critical role for male foster carers too.

But the importance of the male carer's role is not necessarily heeded by professionals. McFadden (1996) laments that an 'insensitive caseworker' may still ignore the foster father's contribution in the increasingly complex task of providing foster care (p 549).

¹ The paper is focused on the role of the man where he has a female partner who is also fostering with him. The issues raised by single men or gay men fostering certainly need exploration but they are generally beyond the specific scope of this article.

Reasons why men as foster carers are important

Men can perform a number of significant roles and tasks within the foster family.

Emotional meaning for foster child of relationship with male foster carer

Foster children invariably bring a history of their relationships with males to the foster placement. They may often have had negative experiences at the hands of men who have shown erratic, unreliable, absent, intimidating or violent behaviour. Children may have been abused by men or witnessed men abusing their mothers. Children may also have suffered indirectly at the hands of well-intentioned men. They are quite likely to have been brought into care in a traumatic episode by men (police), or may have had to make court appearances before judges – again often male.

The male foster carer role may thus be laden with meaning and therapeutic significance for many foster children. Relationships with a male foster carer have the potential to help foster children to lay the ghost of past trauma caused by men. Male foster carers can help to challenge any negative images of men the foster children harbour, born from their past hurtful encounters with men. A positive relationship or even a non-destructive relationship with a man may help heal children who have been emotionally scarred by previous male behaviour. Not only can a positive relationship with a male foster carer help relieve psychological harm from the past, it can also help children avoid being unwittingly trapped into re-enacting negative patterns with men in the future.

For some children, prior contact with men will have been not so much difficult as minimal. Contact with the male foster carer may give the child a first real encounter with men in personal relationships, since for many children, natural fathers tend to be out of the picture (Social Services Inspectorate, 1996, p 23). Furthermore, in many cultures, a clear majority of primary school teachers are female. Thus a number of children in the care system may have grown up without regular close daily contact with

men at home or in school.

In Kennedy's (1998) study of children in foster care, some young women admitted alarm at the prospect of being placed in households which included a man. Their previous experience of family life had been of men as absent or fleeting figures rather than as household fixtures. This underlines Swan's (1997) point that agencies may have to plan for the pacing of children's contact with prospective male carers when there has been trauma involving males in the young person's past. This is yet another reason why the man in foster care should not be seen as some kind of incidental extra who happens to come free with the key female carer.

Male foster carers as appropriate role models for foster children

There is an opportunity in foster care for men (in the foster carer role) to model safe trustworthy caring by men. Male foster carers should be able to offer the everyday therapy of living trouble free with a man whose presence at times also brings fun, warmth or safety. This may allow a child to find appropriate safety or intimacy with men in the future. The presence of a man may help to rectify distorted models of what is 'normal' in a relationship between a man and a woman, revealing the potential for constructive relationships between the sexes. Everyday expressions of affection and everyday conflicts which are appropriately resolved can provide important learning for a child. A man who plays an active role in the domestic labour of the household will also challenge fixed views of gender roles which the child may well have inherited from past experience.

Male foster carers as mentors in children's social development

The developmental importance of involvement in activities and the value of interests and talents for self-esteem and self-efficacy have been explored elsewhere (Gilligan, 1999). For all children, but especially for foster children recovering from adversity, the value of activities opens up an important opportunity for mentoring children's progress in such

activities. Within this perspective the man's role in foster care is not as some peripheral extra but can play a central part in fostering the qualities in the child which will promote their all-round development and the resilience which can help them to transcend adversity. Linked to this point, Triseliotis *et al* (1995, p 72) also contend that the male carer's involvement in such activities lends greater stability to the placement.

Influence on partners' view of foster care

The man's attitude may influence his female partner's motivation to foster. The man will possibly lead the interest in a couple's wish to foster, although it is perhaps more typical for him to back up the woman's initial interest. His emotional and practical support may be very critical, both in coping with the everyday demands on the woman carer and also at times of crisis. This expectation that support will be forthcoming is likely to be a crucial ingredient of the woman's coping strategy. A positive attitude from the man may also influence the view held by the couple's own children of fostering and the foster children.

General importance of relationship with fathers in child development

Within the fields of developmental psychology, child development and social policy, there is a growing appreciation of the developmental significance of relationships with fathers for children as they grow up (Lamb, 1997; Russell *et al*, 1999). It seems reasonable to hypothesise that the importance of a male presence does not recede where the child's normal development has been compromised in some way, or where the male presence is in some senses a surrogate for the biological father figure.

It should not be forgotten that some children may have suffered harm by women, particularly in the case of, for example, physical or emotional abuse. In such cases, it may prove very helpful for children to have a close relationship with a male carer.

Men's role as foster carers may have broader social significance too. It seems reasonable to argue that it is vital for the

future of our societies – and the development of our children – that men have, and are seen to have, a role and contribution as carers. It is important for social workers and others concerned about the quality of society to support expressions and modelling of caring by men (Pringle, 1995, pp 209–10). Foster care represents an important context and medium in this respect.

Policy issues raised for agencies by male carers

While there are positive reasons for being interested in the importance of the man's role in foster care, some of course are less positive. There are instances of male foster carers betraying the trust invested in them by abusing the child in their care. In some child welfare systems internationally, agencies have reacted to the risk of abuse faced by children while in care by, for example, enforcing very strict protocols which prevent men being alone with female children in foster care. While such a policy is undoubtedly motivated by a wish to protect the man and the child (and the agency and the placement resource), it may carry a high price in the longer term. If the agency is solely preoccupied with the negative aspect of its relationship with men as foster carers, carers and professionals are likely to lose sight of the positive contributions men may have to offer.

In many Western countries, patterns of substantial or rising male unemployment, or trends such as tele-working, may increase the time men in foster care have available for face-to-face contact with children. Agencies locked into a consciously or unconsciously 'risk-led' view of men may prefer not to face up to the implications of such trends. On the other hand, agencies alert to the potential positive contribution of male carers could see these trends as presenting opportunities to enhance the range of responses which are on offer to children in their care. For agencies with less hopeful views of men's potential role, the implications of the man being seen as 'big bad wolf' must be faced up to. There are no easy answers. However, if as seems likely, allegations become more frequent, men

and their partners may adopt a perfectly understandable defensive strategy, leading to withdrawal or, less obviously, a decision not even to apply to foster. In a climate where recruitment appears to be increasingly problematic, it seems plausible to suggest that agencies with an upbeat, proactive approach to men as carers are more likely to retain and attract carers.

The present study

The data now presented were gathered mainly in two focus groups of men who foster, comprising seven or eight in each case. Supplementary data were also collected in three workshops on the topic of men in foster care, open to men and women, carers and professionals. Two of the workshops were held at the 1996 and 1997 annual conferences of the Irish Foster Care Association and one at the International Foster Care Organisation Conference in Vancouver, July 1997. Questions sought to elicit how the men found the role of foster carer, which aspects they found difficult and which rewarding. While the questions informed the researcher's approach to the group, this does not mean that the discussion followed such an orderly structure. The men's need to air their experiences did not necessarily lead to a discussion which conformed closely with the research agenda. The findings are discussed in relation to three key themes:

- the role men play in foster care in supporting their partner as the primary carer;
- men's relationship with the foster children;
- the impact of allegations and scandals in foster care.

Supporting their partner as the primary carer

The male foster carer can play a number of supportive roles in relation to their partner carer. These may sound very traditional to some observers but they certainly seemed very real for the respondents concerned. The man can play a role as *respite giver*. One man described

his role as being to 'let the wife out' when he comes home after she has had a long and unrelenting day as carer and 'she is climbing the wall'. Other men echoed this point, seeing one of their tasks as being to 'take the kids out'. Another described his return home in the evening as a 'release valve' for the pressure which might have built up in the day between his partner and the foster children. A further practical aspect of respite giving might be in contributing to housekeeping. One man saw it as part of his brief to 'do all the cooking when off duty'.

A second role identified in discussion was that of mediator between their partner and the social worker. If things have become difficult with the agency or social worker, the man and his partner may see it as appropriate for him to lend weight to the lead (female) carer's cause. A linked role for the man was that of *protector/supporter*, especially where the woman seemed to be suffering too much from the demands of the foster child or the agency. The man could help to 'draw the line' with the agency if stress were proving overwhelming. One man saw his role as that of a 'vital prop' in this regard, for the whole fostering project. Part of this supportive role involved playing the part of *perspective giver* in the maelstrom of emotions and stress which can be the lived reality of the day-to-day fostering experience. Some men thought their more detached perspective brought 'balance'. One man explained how he consciously tried to offer this detachment and balance by 'countersigning' important decisions which have to be made in relation to the fostering task and relationship. Another rather predictable role for the man was that of a *source of discipline*. In response to my question in one group of whether it was a case of 'Wait till your Daddy gets home', the answer was a collective 'yes'.

Relating to the foster child

A fairly recurrent theme in accounts of the man's role in foster care, whether recounted by men or women, was that of involving the young people in activities outside the home. In many senses they could be seen as activity programmers. One man said he saw his role as being to

'read the papers and see what's on to take the kids to'.

The men were also seen as *activity leaders*. The specific things men reported themselves doing included the following: 'I burn off the energy'; 'I teach the kids boxing'; '. . . [provide] fun slots'; '. . . [offer] fun and dancing'; '. . . organise picnics and barbecues, make toast at the fire . . . It's hard to fall out after a good feed.'; 'We're always involved in football.'

Other men spoke of the importance to them and their foster children of opportunities for outings, time in the wilderness, teaching woodcraft and such like. But for some, the activity might be more mundane and routine:

Earlier on, when the girls came to us first . . . I used to take them on walks with the dog or take them for a walk to the local shop with their pocket money, that sort of thing. That was great. Or up to the pitch where there would be sports or a match on.

Another important dimension of the male carer's role was seen as the *sharer of time with the foster child*. Various respondents indicated an opportunistic approach to finding moments to share with their foster children. One man who worked from home as a carpenter was often 'helped' by his young foster son who had his own (toy) tool kit. Another man found shared time by taking the foster children 'on walks with the dog'. In a further example, a man who was fostering two teenage girls had a particular low-key strategy to try to engage them in conversation:

You always make it your business to put the kettle on when you know they're coming out of the bedroom in five minutes' time from the homework and have a cuppa and a chat with them that way.

While these relatively sedate domestic activities convey one aspect of the male fostering experience, they do not reflect a more malign aspect which is clearly close to the surface of many male carers' experiences and fears.

Impact of allegations and scandals in foster care

The risk of allegations being made against male carers was a frequently cited concern. It can rob the male carers' role and relationships of spontaneity. One man corroborated this point when he said that 'You have to watch yourself'. This can prove very oppressive since the foster carers have to do this within the context of living out their life in their own home. Another man responded with specific reference to his relationship to a young girl whom he was fostering:

It affects the way I react, yes. I'm more inclined to lift her down [if she gets up on his lap].

Another man had become even more wary:

. . . you just have to be very careful, especially with all these claims of sexual assault. This area is so broad now – you could simply put your arms around the child and suddenly it's 'He touched me'.

Another said an allegation was his 'biggest fear'. In one group interview in Ireland, it happened that there had been extensive international media coverage about a 15-year-old allegedly killed by a foster father in previous days in a different jurisdiction. As one man observed, 'That sort of thing doesn't pass over your head'. The issue extends to other males in the household such as the carers' teenage sons. These concerns are not unique to the Irish context. Inch (1999) reported that the risk of abuse and allegations was a concern of foster fathers in his qualitative study of 15 male foster carers in the USA. Newstone (1999) found a similar preoccupation in his research on 'men who foster' in England. Swan (1997), in her Canadian study, quoted a foster mother speaking about the dilemma facing men in this area:

It is hard for men to find the zones where they can be strong and nurturing and physically warm. There is so much they can be accused of. A man is certainly much more likely to be accused of a child's sexual abuse than a woman. (p 78)

The recent Scottish study of foster carers did not highlight the issue of anxiety about allegations as a dominant concern for foster carers (Triseliotis *et al*, 2000). Nevertheless, it suggests that it is an issue which may be said to be lurking in the undergrowth and which is ignored at the agencies' peril. In a climate of difficulty in recruiting and keeping foster carers in many jurisdictions, this issue seems to have a clear bearing on their motivation and retention.

The implications of the need for a 'focus on men' for agency practice and policy

Agencies need to recognise a number of possible risks in terms of how they deal with men. There is the danger of men being marginalised by social workers, even if unconsciously. Social workers may only engage in 'small talk' with the male foster carer. In one discussion among mixed foster carers and social workers, a social worker confessed to resorting to 'chit chat' with the man on the phone, until the woman foster carer came along and took the receiver and the real business could be started. There is also the danger of the men feeling that they are being related to as a risk to be regulated. Men may be trapped in a type-cast role of potential abuser.

If agencies are to adjust how they relate to men so that this is framed in positive terms, what are they to do? A key step is an overriding and explicit presumption of male involvement in training, caring and contact with the social worker (Newstone, 1999). Agencies need to recognise and emphasise that men have to be active and skilled for foster families to 'cope with today's kids'. Men need to be seen as resources for, rather than barriers to, successful placements. There are practical measures such as the scheduling of training to accommodate men's work routines outside the home. There needs to be a clear focus on issues about men, and on their specific perceptions and concerns. As Swan (1997) also argues, there should be a definite focus on sexual behaviour in children and the issues it raises. These have to be 'on the table from Day One' of the family's contact with the

agency, as one workshop participant put it. Training can help alert social workers and foster carers to the practical and therapeutic potential of the man's role. Agencies should create opportunities for men to have peer support and to discuss their own specific concerns. This almost certainly implies the involvement of male workers. Agencies also need to develop clear policy/protocols/training in order to normalise the operation of procedures for abuse prevention and the handling of allegations.

This article highlights the issue of men in foster care. It argues that it should be considered within a much broader framework than merely the risk or prevention of sexual abuse or sexual abuse allegations. It contends that the role of men can also be usefully considered from a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1997). Within such a framework, the role and presence of men can be explicitly acknowledged as offering special therapeutic and other positive opportunities. The article reports on a modest exploratory study which used focus groups to open up some aspects of men's involvement in foster care. Focus groups are good at opening up ground in this way but they are unlikely to be the best method – particularly with men – to elicit the more intimate and personal concerns and experiences of men, their partners, social workers and foster children, in the matrix of relationships involving men as foster carers. There would seem to be ample scope to seek further, more in-depth research, employing more structured research designs in this area. There would also appear to be many strong policy reasons for doing so. The price of neglecting the role of men in fostering policy development seems likely to be high, as may be an exclusive construction by agencies of men as a 'threat'.

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