

Multiple topics

The education of looked after children in foster care

This learning activity supports:

- Topic 9: Communicating effectively with children and young people
- Topic 10: Multidisciplinary working
- Topic 14: Placement stability and permanence

This exercise has been adapted from the Fostering Now Fostering Service Development Exercises¹.

Introduction

School for foster children is much more than a route to academic success or otherwise. It provides structure to the day. It is a place where they must cope with the potential stigma of 'being in care', with the fact that their name is not the same as that of their carers or that they are conveyed to school in unusual ways. It can be a means of keeping in touch with friends from their former lives. For black children in white families it can be an important source of role models and of contacts with black children.

[Difficulties at school] are associated with problems in the placement and elsewhere. Foster children who were unhappy at school or who truanted from it or were excluded, tended to show other difficulties.

Fostering Now: Messages from Research (Sinclair, 1 2005) p97

Methods

Suitable for a group discussion in a team meeting, or as part of a facilitated workshop.

Learning Outcome

- To enable practitioners to consider the role of school and the broader nature of education in the life of a young person who is looked after.
- To enable practitioners to consider their role in supporting and encouraging young people to achieve optimal outcomes in education.

Time Required

60 minutes including:

- 10 minutes brainstorm
- 10 minutes individual reflection
- 10 minutes review from the carer's perspective
- 30 minutes group discussion

Part 1 (10 minutes)

Ask group members to identify some of the difficulties that children and young people in foster care experience at school. List them on a flipchart.

These are some of the difficulties that are highlighted in the research that you can use during your discussion with the group:

- changes of school
- prolonged periods out of school
- feeling picked on by teachers
- getting behind with the curriculum
- not having the right equipment for school
- getting in with the wrong crowd at school
- arriving in taxis (when other students don't)
- having a different name from the foster carer
- social workers visiting school
- low self-esteem
- disruptive behaviour
- bullying
- feeling threatened
- not being part of a friendship group
- lack of liaison between carer and social worker to ensure someone goes to parents' evenings and other school events.

Part 2 (10 minutes)

The research indicates that foster children are likely to have had a severely disrupted education before they arrive with their foster family, so it is likely that a major effort will be needed to ensure foster children achieve educational success. Bearing this in mind, ask participants to conduct the following part of the exercise alone. Ask them to think about a young person they know and then consider the following questions:

- How would they describe that young person's experience of school?
- Does the young person attend school regularly and on time?
- Who knows what the young person is doing at school?
 - Who is informed about progress?
- Does the young person need extra help in any area, such as literacy or numeracy?
- What is the young person good at?
 - Is this promoted at school?
- Who supports the young person with their homework and helps them study?

Multiple topics

- How are successes and achievements marked and acknowledged at school and at home?
- How is the young person encouraged to have high expectations of themselves?

Part 3 (10 minutes)

Now ask participants (still working on their own) to imagine that the young person is in their care – in other words, that they are the foster carer, parent, or social worker – and then ask them to consider the following four questions:

- How would they know if the young person was unhappy at school?
- What is their role in supporting the young person's Personal Education Plan (PEP)?
- How would they develop ways of 'heading off trouble' (e.g. making sure the young person gets to school with the right equipment and on time, allowing them time to talk about their day when they get back)
- Are they clear about their role in relation to the school? (e.g. are they supposed to go to parents' evenings and talk to teachers; how do they think the child or young person would feel about this?)

Part 4 (30 minutes)

Next, lead a group discussion on the issues raised by the above exercise. This should cover the following questions:

- How much do practitioners working with young people know and understand about an individual young person's education and their experience?
- What difference does this make to the young person?
- What is their role in supporting young people to achieve optimum educational outcomes?
- What can they do to improve their contribution?
- How can foster carers, social workers and teachers be supported further to achieve optimal educational outcomes for children and young people in foster care?

ⁱ Research in Practice (2005) Fostering Now: Fostering Service Development Exercises