NAFP

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OF FOSTERING PROVIDERS

Language in fostering

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Introduction

*Language is powerful.
It has the ability to elicit strong emotions and can influence our thoughts, actions and beliefs.*
(Adoption UK, 2020)

This practice note considers how language is used in relation to fostering, in a context where some children and young people in care have indicated a discomfort and dissatisfaction with certain words that are used to describe them and their experiences. Language is powerful and words matter. They underpin meaning, communicate attitudes, and reflect social relationships.

The Independent Care Review in Scotland (2020, p.10) considered the importance of terminology:

The Care Review heard from children that the words used by the workforce to describe their lives, like 'unit' and 'placement' and 'contact' and 'respite' and 'LAC' (looked after child), are not the same as those used by their non-care-experienced peers. They told the Care Review that this language compounds a sense of being different, can exacerbate low self-esteem and is stigmatising.

These issues are complex and important. They are not easily resolved and language changes over time. For a number of reasons, it is not possible or desirable to simply learn a set of 'correct' words or phrases, but rather practitioners should consider and understand the importance of language and think carefully about how and when they use particular words. That is the key message in this practice note.

Principles

Deciding on the most suitable terminology to use in any given situation is not easy. It should be influenced by a number of factors, which at times may contradict, or come into conflict with each other. Appropriate terminology should:

- Be accurate and effectively describe what is being referred to
- Be easily and commonly understood by a range of audiences/stakeholders
- Reflect 'plain English' principles
- Use the correct legal terminology where this matters
- Avoid stigmatising or stereotyping groups of people
- Reflect anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice principles
- Take account of the wishes of children and their families, and reflect these wishes wherever possible
- Be used according to context, recognising that what might be appropriate in one context may not be appropriate in another
- Be individualised when applied to individual children and young people, influenced by their wishes and feelings

When considering what words to use, practitioners should be influenced by this set of principles, and the context in which their words are being used.

Context

When working with individual children and young people language should reflect their wishes, feelings, and preferences. It will often be the case that children and young people prefer the avoidance of generic terms, especially where these terms constitute professional jargon or reinforce their differences in terms of being looked after. In most cases it will not be hard to accommodate their preferences. If a child does not like the term 'siblings' it is perfectly possible and desirable to use the names of their brother and sister – 'How did it go when you saw David and Sarah at the week-end?'[1] Similarly the name of the foster carer can be used rather than a general term like 'foster carer' that serves to emphasise the child's looked after status.

It may be necessary or desirable to use different terms in other contexts and according to who is expected to understand what is being said. For example, it might be more helpful in a foster carer review report to talk about the child's 'siblings' rather than use their names, because in this scenario the audience will not know who 'David and Sarah' are, and the report is not primarily for, or about, the child who is in care.

Where terminology is used in legal contexts including in statutory guidance or other government department publications, or by inspectorates, it may be necessary to use that same terminology even if it is not ideal. It may be that at the same time efforts are made to encourage formal changes to achieve a more desirable term. All of this means that in most cases it will be unhelpful to list 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' words, since appropriateness will depend on context, and the meaning and usage of words will change over time.

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1   There is evidence that some young people do not like the term 'sibling' and prefer 'brother' and 'sister' as phrases that are used more commonly and feel more natural. Others in the trans community point out that gendering siblings in a binary way serves to exclude those young people who do not define as male or female. This illustrates the complexity of the issues, and shows why it is impossible to agree one 'correct' term.

Considering some words and phrases

Words to describe fostered children

There are a number of words that are commonly used by professionals and others in relation to children who are in foster care, that highlight or emphasise their care status such as 'looked after child' often abbreviated to 'LAC'. That can be seen as problematic in so far as it defines children by the fact that they do not live with their birth parents and can be seen as 'othering'. The problem is compounded by the fact there are numerous negative stereotypes and assumptions made about children in care. At the same time, it is factually correct to note that some children live with foster carers because they are unable to live with birth parents, and there is a genuine necessity to differentiate these children from others in the community for a number of good and important reasons.

It will likely be impossible and undesirable to cease to use these terms, but it will be important that the views of individual children, and groups of children in certain contexts like care councils, are taken into account. There will be times when these words are appropriate to use, but other times when they are not.

A child should never be described as 'a placement' as that serves to define them solely in terms of their relationship with the care system and emphasises their status as a looked after child. It is dehumanising. Instead, they might be referred to using their name, or as a child or young person in foster care, depending on context. It might however be acceptable to talk about a foster carer having 'had ten placements over the year', as this phrase will be deliberately specifying the number of children in their care

under fostering regulations, and differentiating them from other children in the household. It is an appropriate legal term when used in the correct context.

Corporate parent

The Independent Care Review in Scotland (2020, p.112) considered the term 'corporate parent':

The Care Review has heard that the term 'corporate parent' feels cold and impersonal and at odds with an approach that seeks to uphold relationships that make children feel loved, safe and respected.

Some young people have suggested that this is a meaningless and misleading term, as the very nature of parenting is about individual love and commitment, and is something that cannot be provided by a 'corporation'. Others will likely feel differently and will believe that this concept and the associated term is important in highlighting the responsibility of the state in relation to the children it has legal responsibility to look after effectively.

Terminology that blames or emphasises difficulties

When used to describe children or young people in foster care, phrases such as 'challenging behaviour' or 'difficult to place' can be experienced as negative and stigmatising. They can be interpreted as problematising the young person and highlighting how they create difficulties for others. The alternative is to consider the situation from the perspective

of the child or young person and highlight the failure of the state to be able to offer suitable accommodation that meets their needs, or to take responsibility for allowing abuse and neglect that may have led to difficulties in coping, or subsequent mental health challenges.

It is important to recognise that young people subject to these descriptions are not at fault and should not be blamed. In describing individual children and young people it will often be best to avoid generalisations altogether and describe the specific behaviours that are relevant.

Nevertheless, in some contexts these phrases will be important in providing a short-hand description of something that needs to be conveyed. Developing a fostering service for young people who are 'hard to place' is arguably an appropriate and laudable aim. It may also be seen as an accurate and neutral statement to point out that it will not be easy to find a foster placement for a particular child or young person if they have a history of fire-setting or assaulting foster carers. It is important that language is not used in a way that distorts the truth or misleads people, including by omission.

Similar consideration should be given to the term 'vulnerable' which may feel negative and stigmatising to some.

When The Promise Scotland refers to children and families who are 'under supported', it means children and families who are often referred to by others as 'vulnerable' but is recognising that this is not part of their identity. Rather, it is often the 'system' that makes children and families vulnerable through its lack of adequate support. (Independent Care Review, 2021)

Others may feel that this approach fails to set out matters in a truthful and factually correct manner, and might argue that support can only be provided once vulnerability is identified, recognised and named.

Respite/ planned breaks

'Respite' describes arrangements for a child in foster care to move to another foster carer for a period of time, usually because the primary foster carer needs a break, time to 'recharge their batteries' or in order to spend time with other children in the household. This can take the form of planned regular events, such as a weekend every month, or can be one-off events, or extended longer breaks to allow foster carers to go on holiday. 'Respite' is the term used by the Department for Education and by Ofsted, and reflects the fact that children in foster care may bring particular challenges and that foster carers need to look after themselves to avoid 'burnout' or 'secondary trauma'. Respite is a controversial term because it implies respite from children and young people, and as such might feel critical and rejecting.

Others might argue that respite is an acceptable term in that this accurately describes the reality of the situation. The fact that fostering is difficult, and more difficult than parenting in most cases, is exactly the reason why respite developed as a concept. It might be argued that offering 'respite' to foster carers is only appropriate where it is necessary for this very reason, and should not be something that is an entitlement for foster carers across the board. The requirement for respite reflects the fact that children in foster care have often experienced abuse and neglect, and as a result are more challenging to parent than other children. It implies no criticism of those children, but rather reflects a reality, and the provision of respite

means those children get the best care possible. It can also be said that respite offers a break for the young person from the same foster carer. The Fostering Network (2020) have used the term 'planned breaks'[2] alongside 'respite fostering' which is defined as being 'when parents/carers and children are given a break whereby the child goes to temporarily stay with another carer for a short period of time'. Given the strength of feeling on this issue, it may be that 'planned breaks' is a less controversial term than 'respite' and as such is more in line with the views and wishes of children and young people in care. However, it does not change the facts regarding why such provision is needed, and over time the word 'planned breaks' might come to be experienced in the same way as 'respite'. Arguably it does still imply that foster carers need a 'break' from the children they care for, and in that sense is open to the same criticism that can be applied to the word 'respite'. Some fostering services have talked of 'sleepovers' but that only makes sense if the stay is overnight, and does not distinguish 'respite' from sleepovers with peers.

Describing families

Words that are used for families and people within families can be contentious. The Independent Care Review (2021) in Scotland notes that when it 'talks about 'families', it means all families including families of origin, kinship families, foster families and adoptive families.' The problem is that it is sometimes necessary for very legitimate reasons to differentiate between these different families, and many children in care will consider that they have more than one family.

'Birth family' is maybe the most common term used to denote a child's first family but that is not always comfortable, and most people don't insert 'birth' before the word family; it is assumed to be the case unless otherwise stated. This means that children in care and their families may feel different and stigmatised.

The terms 'mum' and 'dad' are also powerful, and again far from straightforward. Traditionally social workers have discouraged children from calling their foster carers 'mum' or 'dad' but that approach is arguably unhelpful when children are living permanently with carers who they consider to be 'parenting' them in a close and loving relationship. There are arguments to suggest that it is the children themselves who should decide on the most appropriate words to use, based on how they see the significance and nature of the relationship.

In these considerations, rigid approaches and preferred terminology are probably unhelpful. Each case will need to be considered on its merits, taking into account the principles set out earlier in this practice note.

Contact or family time

'Contact' is a word that came into being in England following the introduction of the Children Act in 1989. At the time it was introduced it was felt to be a neutral description that did not have the connotations that came with the previous legal term that was 'access.' 'Contact' remains the term used in statutory guidance and other practice materials to describe the arrangements for children in care

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2   In the Fostering Network definition 'planned breaks' encompasses both 'respite' and 'short breaks'. The latter refers to an on-going series of out of family arrangements for disabled children.

to see or maintain relationships with their birth family or significant others.

However, the term contact has since been challenged as not constituting plain English, and as failing to recognise the emotional significance of maintaining relationships with birth families and others. According to the Care Review in Scotland (2020, p.87):

… children must not be told they are going for 'contact' when they see their mum or dad. This use of disrespectful language can lead to low self-esteem and compounds a self-stigmatisation as children realise that their peers do not use this type of language.

The most often suggested alternative to the term 'contact' is 'family time' and in many cases that might work better. It might however be deemed problematic in so far as it suggests a time period and thus excludes activity such as sending letters, cards and presents that would come within the term 'contact'. It also might be problematic for children who see their foster carers as their 'family' and consider that spending time with them is 'family time'. Others have suggested terms like 'staying connected' or 'staying in touch' but for some they will be too vague and unsatisfactory for a number of reasons.

Race and ethnicity

Words used in relation to race and ethnicity are too complex and important to be considered in any depth in this short practice note, and the issues have relevance to communities other than children in foster care and their families. It is worth noting, however, that commonly used terms like 'BAME' and 'BME' are very problematic for many. In working with individual children and families it is important to ask them how they would like their ethnicity to be described, providing support where necessary to help them understand the different terms and the meaning behind them.

Conclusion

In considering how to use words and language in foster care there are no easy answers. There are principles to consider and work to, but at times these are in contradiction with each other, and cannot offer easy solutions. What is important is that social workers and foster carers reflect on the words they use, consider their impact, and are sensitive to the wishes and feelings of individual children and young people.

Best practice is arguably summed up by the Independent Care Review (2021) in Scotland that sets the ambition of having practitioners who…

…will be able to evidence that the language they use subscribes to an underpinning values base that does not stigmatise children and families. Children and young people will be supported to ensure professionals use the terms, names and words that the child or young person prefers, when describing issues that relate to their lives and experiences. There will be times where the statutory framework requires certain terms to be used, but this should be done sparingly, with the aim of the reduction of stigmatising language at every opportunity.

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