

GREATER EXPECTATIONS

How foster carers can help children aim high and succeed at school

**You can make
THE CHANGE!**

The importance of foster carers in turning children's lives around

'MY FOSTER CARER ALWAYS TOLD ME THAT I COULD DO IT'

University graduate Nadine tells her story

CHILDREN STRUGGLING WITH EXAMS?

Feeling singled out?

Education expert Sabrina knows how foster carers can help



**The
Fostering
Network**
**Rhwydwaith
Maethu**

PLUS:

5

fab things about friends, top tips for learning at home, links to more info

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people. Transforming fostered children's lives is at the heart of everything we do.

We are the essential network for foster care, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children, inspiring, motivating and supporting them to make foster care better. Together, we're a powerful catalyst for change, influencing and shaping fostering policy and practice at every level.

We work to ensure all fostered children have a positive experience of family life, supporting them to have high aspirations, to overcome the challenges of their early lives and to achieve their very best.

We help foster carers to improve children's lives. We champion the vital role they and their families play in helping fostered children, and work to ensure they are properly recognised, valued and supported.



Contents

-
- 3** Welcome
-
- 4** You can make the change!
-
- 6** A problem shared...
-
- 8** Nadine's story
-
- 10** With a little help from my friends
-
- 11** Learning in everyday life
-
- 12** More information
-

Editor's note

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WELCOME

In 2015, the Welsh Government asked researchers from the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University to explore the educational experiences of looked after children in Wales. The Government wanted to find out more about why many children in care don't do as well at school as other children. They also wanted to hear children's opinions about how things could be improved.



The research team looked at lots of studies that had been carried out about this subject. They talked to children, young people and care leavers between the ages of six and 27 to find out what they thought about their education.

As you can imagine, the young people had lots to say, and the results of the research, which was published late in 2015¹, were very interesting.

The young people emphasised that they had dreams and ambitions – just like their friends – but they said that there were lots of things about being in care that held them back. They had ideas for ways in which things could be made better. In spite of all the barriers, many of them had done well at school.

One important message from the young people was that foster carers can and do make a huge difference.

This magazine draws on the lessons from this research and aims to help you, as foster carers, understand more about the challenges that fostered children face at school. But, more importantly, it gives you some practical ideas for steps to take to help the children in your care aim high and fulfil their potential.



¹ Mannay, D., Staples, E., Hallett, S., Roberts, L., Rees, A., Evans, R. and Andrews, D. 2015. *Understanding the Educational Experience and Opinions, Attainment, Achievement and Aspirations of Looked After Children in Wales*, Cardiff: Welsh Government bit.ly/LACAEducation

You can make the change!

There are over **5,000** children in public care in Wales and more than **4,000** of them are in foster care.



Despite the best efforts of foster carers, teachers, social workers and the government, too many of these children don't do well at school. They don't get such good grades at GCSE, lots are unemployed after they leave school, and only a few go on to university.

There are many reasons for this, including:

- Instability at home, such as frequent moves between foster homes or other placements.
- The experiences children may have had before they went into care, which may have been traumatic, and which may remain unresolved.
- Attachment issues.
- Frequent absences from school, for example, because of placement moves, health issues or truanting.
- Low expectations from teachers, social workers, foster carers and families.
- Limited opportunities and resources.
- Lack of support from teachers, social workers and foster carers.

But, the good news is that foster carers can help change this! Encouragement and practical support at home can make a huge difference – read on to find out more.

Gareth, 13

The teachers say, 'Oh, good, you're trying your best every time', so every time my foster mother is going to a parents' evening, she will say, 'I'm so proud of you', because I've done really well in school.



Connor, 13

My foster carer said I could join the army if I try hard enough and train hard enough, like I do.

RESULTS AT SCHOOL

If we look at the achievements of children at school in Wales, we can see that looked after children are falling behind their peers. But, remember there is also evidence that shows that children who are fostered often do better than other looked after children. What's more, research demonstrates that there is a direct link between having a stable placement and getting better school results.



- At foundation phase, **64%** of looked after children met the expected level, compared with **87%** of all children.
- At Key Stage 2, **64%** of looked after children met the expected level, compared with **88%** of all children.
- At Key Stage 3, **48%** of looked after children met the expected level, compared with **84%** of all children.
- **18%** of looked after children achieved five GCSEs at grade A*-C (including English/Welsh and maths), compared with **58%** of all children.



Figures from the Children in Need census for Wales as at 31 March 2015, bit.ly/WalesStats2016

What happens after school

- In 2015¹, **40%** of care leavers were not in employment, education or training on their 19th birthday.
- There isn't much evidence about higher education, but in 2011² it was estimated that around **2.4%** of care leavers in Wales go on to higher education.



¹ *Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales*, Welsh Government, January 2016 bit.ly/RAEAttainment

² *The Educational Attainment of Looked After Children and Young People*, Welsh Audit Office, August 2012 bit.ly/attainmentWales

A problem shared...



Our adviser, Sabrina, works in a fostering team and is an expert in education. She answers some questions about how foster carers can help young people overcome some of the most common challenges they face.

'My fostered child feels like she's being singled out and treated differently at school because she's in care. Does this happen a lot? What can we do about it?'

Alice, foster carer

I think this happens a lot, Alice. I work with a young woman called Jasmine, 17, and she says: 'As soon as I went into care the majority of my teachers treated me completely differently. They moved me down sets, they put me in special help, they put me in support groups. And I was like, I don't need all this, I've only moved house. But they were like...we don't think you're going to be able to cope.'

Fostered children want to feel the same as other children. They say that it's important to be able to get extra help, but only if they want it, and this should be offered to all children, so that no-one is singled out or made to feel or look different.

So, as a foster carer, this is your opportunity to show your fostered child that you've got high expectations for her! If any teachers don't feel the same, you should have a quiet word with them.

'My social worker keeps making me have my review meetings during class. It's embarrassing to be taken out of class in front of my friends and then I miss out on what's happened. And then half the time they're arguing about which council pays for things to do with my education. I don't like it.'

Charlotte, 13

Hi, Charlotte! I understand what you're saying. I believe that any meetings, if they are necessary, should be held outside of school time, not just at a time that is convenient for the professionals.

Your foster carer can negotiate with social workers to discourage these meetings from taking place during lessons. Quite often, a neutral meeting place after school is much better for everyone.

What's more, your foster carer can find out what's going to be discussed in advance of meetings and put their foot down if inappropriate subjects, such as disputes over who's going to pay for what, are on the agenda. I hope things get better for you, Charlotte.





'My fostered child, Archie, needs to choose which subjects to study for GCSE next year. How can I help him to make the right choices?'

Michael, foster carer

It's important that students get good advice and support when they make these big decisions, Michael, and there are lots of things you can do to help Archie.

I had a chat with Steve, assistant headteacher of Whitchurch High School in Cardiff, and he said that foster carers are encouraged to attend information-sharing events in school about subject choices. He also suggested that you have a chat with Archie about his top choices – discuss whether they fit in with what he might want to do in the future, whether he's doing well in these subjects and whether he enjoys them.

It might also be a good idea to encourage Archie to take a broad choice of different subjects, to keep doors open in the future in case he changes his mind.

'My exams are coming up and I'm scared I'm going to fail them all! My foster carer really wants to help, but she didn't do that well at school so she doesn't have any good advice. What can we do?'

Felix, 15

Hi Felix. Exams can be stressful, but there are lots of ways that you can prepare and it's great that your foster carer wants to help too.

Have you got a nice quiet place to work and all the equipment you need (like pens and pencils, calculators and rulers)? If not, ask your foster carer to help you sort all of this out.

A revision timetable is a good way to make sure that you've studied everything before the big day – your foster carer can help you put one together and encourage you to stick to it if you're feeling a bit unmotivated. Your school may have given you a study skills booklet with some helpful hints in – show it to your foster carer so she can learn about them too.

And don't forget to take some time off to relax too. Your foster carer can remind you to take breaks and spend a bit of time with the rest of the family. Or you might like to get outside and do some sports. Good luck!



NADINE'S STORY



Nadine went into care in Year 8. After being bullied, she moved to a new school in Year 9. Thanks to support from her foster carer, she went to university and she is now looking forward to becoming a primary school teacher.

After you moved to your new school, did you enjoy it?

I didn't want to miss a day off school. I loved school.

Was there anyone in particular who supported you?

There were two French teachers and they were lovely. I went on the French trip with them as well, and when we were in sixth form we got even closer to them. And even if you see them outside school now, they're like 'Oh, hello, how are you?', so it's really good.

Did you have any teachers you didn't like?

Yeah, one teacher basically told me that I had no chance of getting into university because I didn't work hard enough or whatever. I don't know if she did it to try to make me work harder or what, but she made me feel quite rubbish sometimes.

So there was no expectation that you would go on to university?

No, because I remember telling her that I wanted to be a teacher and she said you should look at college courses and stuff, and I was just like, no, I want to go to university.

What about at home? Did your foster carer support you?

My foster carer put a lot of belief in me and she always told me that I could do it. When I'd come home crying because my teacher said I'm not going to be able to do it, she used to say no, you can, you can – she was really supportive. That just put a little bit more belief in me and it made me want to do it that little bit more.

So you decided to go to university. Did social services give you advice about the financial side of things?

To begin with it was a bit touch and go with what they would actually help me with, but my foster carer said 'it doesn't matter about the funding, we'll

sort it out.' So it was never really a worry for me about the financial side of it.

Did you enjoy university?

I loved it, yeah! It was really good getting to know new people and living the student life – it was good.

Did you feel there were any particular barriers that you faced at university being a care experienced young person?

No, the university gave equal opportunities. They helped me and I didn't feel like there were any barriers in the way.

And what do you want to do next?

I want to be a primary school teacher.

Do you think it's important that foster carers talk to children about the possibility of going to university?

Oh, definitely. Without my foster carer I wouldn't be where I am today. I think it is definitely important to talk about it – be honest and try to inspire.

Destination: university!

Here's some more information to help foster carers prepare young people for university.

- A *Foster Carer's Guide to Inspiring and Supporting Care Leavers to Higher Education*, published by The Fostering Network, provides practical information and guidance, including choosing the right course and the UCAS application process, as well as financial, emotional and general support. It also outlines the care leaver support available from each university in Wales. bit.ly/HEtoolkit
- Universities with a student support service will have dedicated pages on their website with further information. If you type *Student Support* in the search boxes of university websites it will link you to the relevant web pages.
- The Propel website has information specifically for care leavers about going to university or college, funding and courses. propel.org.uk
- Remember that it's important to tick the 'care leaver' box on the UCAS university application form. It's confidential, so there's no need to be embarrassed and it means that a care leaver will be helped to get any extra support they need. For more information see The Fostering Network's 'Tick the Box' campaign. thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/our-campaigns/tick-box



Roxy, 12



'I want to go to college. Once I've finished college I'll go to university to learn about geography.'

Imogen, 11



'I want to be a teacher. When I've finished university, I'm going to find a school and ask the head if I can join.'

Hulk, 12



'I want to be an architect because I like art and most of my family are builders.'

With a little help from my friends

Being at school isn't just about sitting in class and learning. Making friends helps children to feel as though they fit in and gives them confidence.



Friends provide stability and continuity when other things are changing in their lives – such as placement moves, changes in social workers or carers. Friends can offer trusted support when times are tough and offer protection from bullies.

'I always have good days in school, just doing normal lessons and being with my friends.' Alesha, 16

'My group of friends, we'd all walk in together and walk out together. That's what I thought school was for everyone really.' Tom, 17

Without friends, children may be less keen to go to school and feel isolated. They know that parties, sleepovers and playdates are going on without them.

'You're always trying to make new friends and then you're always falling out because you haven't got the same bonds – you've got to make them again. And then you've got to do your education as well, but then you're struggling because you haven't got any friends.' Tracy, 18

'I never got invited to parties outside of school or social events outside of school because I wasn't as well-known. You know, obviously they all knew each other.' Johnny, 18

5 fab things about friends

Being part of a friendship group helps with...

- 1 Confidence
- 2 Resilience
- 3 Stability
- 4 Learning
- 5 Protection from bullies



FRIENDS: helping your child or young person make them and keep them

1. Encourage your child to take up a sport or a hobby that they can take part in with their classmates. This is what Tanya, 17, did. She says: *'I was really into netball, so I played netball at every break and I think that helped, in that you know you are part of the gang. So when you get into class you're more ready to learn because you're with your friends.'*

2. If your fostered child has to move schools, try to help them keep in touch with good friends, even though they won't see them every day like before. This can help create stability. Isabelle, 11, says she was happy that her foster carers helped her to keep seeing her best friend. She adds: *'We are still best friends, but*

we don't see each other as much as we used to because we're not in the same school.'

3. Many children like to meet other looked after children – they can share similar experiences with them. As Jackie, 16, says, it's good *'knowing that everyone there has been through the same as you have and knowing that we can make a difference for each other'*. Your supervising social worker should be able to help you find groups of these children to connect with.

4. It might be easier for a child to make friends if they are placed in a school near where they live. As Marty, 16, points out: *'If a child doesn't*

know anything in the area, the only way for them to build a good friendship group is by moving to a school that is near where they live. If they move to a school that's far away they're not going to get the bonds.' As a foster carer, you should have a leading role to play in the decision about which school a child in your care goes to, so talk to the child's social worker about this.

5. Say 'Hi' to your fostered child's friends and their parents or carers when you pick them up from school – you might be the most embarrassing adult in the world, but at least you're making a connection! After that, you can think about inviting them round to play, or organising other get-togethers.

LEARNING IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Supporting children's education is about meetings with teachers and other professionals, helping with homework, dealing with stressful exam periods, checking uniforms and what's in schoolbags – the list is almost endless.

But children, especially younger children, can learn lots by taking part in everyday family activities too. While we're often keen to get chores out of the way, don't forget that they can be great opportunities to count, read, measure, and recognise shapes and colours. Supermarkets are full of shapes, words and numbers. That big pile of clean washing contains socks that can be paired by colour. A tricky recipe can help a budding mathematician develop their numerical skills.

What's more, sharing an activity together with your fostered child can really help your relationship to grow.



Ideas for learning at home

- Let children budget their pocket money and take responsibility for it.
- Encourage them to read a TV guide and work out timings.
- Play games where they have to keep score.
- Encourage them to keep a little diary and write down the best thing that happened to them each day.
- Encourage them to write down appointments and playdates.
- Get them to write shopping lists, recipes, send postcards or write emails.
- Ask them to write you notes about what they want for tea or in their lunchbox.
- Encourage reading by making time to read together, finding books about subjects they're interested in (such as sports) and leaving books in places where your child might spend some time – like the bathroom.

WORKING TOGETHER: A CHOCOLATE BROWNIE RECIPE

This recipe from The Fostering Network is very easy. It will take about an hour, including baking time.



INGREDIENTS

- 175g unsalted butter
- 150g dark chocolate
- 3 eggs
- 300g caster sugar
- 75g plain flour
- 40g cocoa powder

METHOD

1. Melt the butter and chocolate together in a heatproof bowl set over a pan of simmering water.
2. When the mixture is melted and smooth, set aside to cool for 20 minutes.
3. Preheat oven to 180C/160C fan/gas mark 4 and lightly grease and line a 20.5cm (8in) square tin with baking parchment.
4. Beat the eggs and sugar together in a large bowl.
5. Add chocolate to the eggs and sugar and fold together.
6. Add flour, cocoa powder and a pinch of salt and fold together.
7. Pour into prepared tin, and bake for 30 minutes.

More information



Resources for supporting children and young people

Making it Happen: How foster carers can help children raise their aspirations and fulfil their ambitions in education. A magazine introducing the education system in Wales
bit.ly/MakingitHappen

A Foster Carer's Guide to Education in Wales, Maria Boffey and John Galloway, The Fostering Network, 2016 bit.ly/FCGEinWales

Education, Anne Collis, The Fostering Network, 2008

Thrive, a special education issue of the magazine for fostered young people in Wales bit.ly/TFNthrive

The Fostering Network's website at thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/education

Fosterline Wales can offer advice

T: 0800 316 7664

E: fosterlinewales@fostering.net

(See also the links about higher education on page 9)

Research and policies

Understanding the Educational Experience and Opinions, Attainment, Achievement and Aspirations of Looked After Children in Wales, Dawn Mannay, Eleanor Staples, Sophie Hallett, Louise Roberts, Alyson Rees, Rhiannon Evans and Darren Andrews, Cardiff University, November 2015.

This link bit.ly/LACAEducation gives access to the study as well as a number of supporting materials, including films, posters and songs.

Children in Need Census, Welsh Government, bit.ly/CiNCensus

Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales Strategy, Welsh Government, January 2016, bit.ly/RAEAttainment

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