

Peer or parent: The role of adolescent children of local authority foster carers.

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Abstract

When I was sixteen years old, my parents became local authority foster carers. There is no legal recognition of the role that older children play in the care of younger foster siblings. We are not recognised as carers, and yet are often involved in providing care and supervision of younger siblings. There are recorded benefits to being a foster sibling, but there are also challenges that come with the role. Within this reflective narrative piece, I seek to trigger a discussion within the field around the role that young adults play in the fostering process. I use my own experience to raise key issues around the safeguarding of not only young people who are looked after, but also those whose parents choose to foster. In doing so I aim to open debate around the responsibilities of practitioners to recognise and adequately prepare young adults for the role they will play in a fostering household.

Introduction

Not long after I turned sixteen, my parents were approved as local authority foster carers for emergency, long-term, and sibling placements. We had been through the assessment and panel, and we began providing a home for children and young people. Just like that, I became a foster sibling. In this reflective piece, I will discuss some of the challenges I faced as a sixteen-year-old foster sibling, also known as a child who fosters. In doing so, I will highlight areas of practice that could be improved and raise the following critical questions about the role of older foster siblings in the fostering process:

1. To what extent should we consider sixteen- and seventeen-year children of foster carers to be part of the care team?
 - a. If they are considered part of the team, should they have the same responsibilities and training as foster parents?
 - b. If not, how do we prepare them for the challenges of helping to care for foster siblings outside of existing training and support networks? How do we recognise their input?
2. How do we best prepare and support the older birth children of foster parents?
 - a. Is the support of a family social worker sufficient to protect the rights and interests of the children of foster carers?
 - b. Should older foster siblings have access to their own support service independent of their parents?

Before I bemoan the challenges, I would like to acknowledge that fostering was not a negative experience. On the contrary, there were overwhelmingly positive aspects for both my sense of social justice and my own emotional and social development. Like many foster siblings, I became more compassionate and tolerant; my world view being widened beyond the white, middle-class bubble in which I lived (Clare et al., 2006; Pugh, 1996). I became more understanding of the different experiences of the people around me, rushing to judge others less and respecting the privilege in my upbringing (Gypen et al., 2020; Höjer, 2004; Spears & Cross, 2003). I also developed a close bond with the children and young people who lived with us, however briefly. The usefulness of discussing these factors, however, is limited; as the proverb says, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”. This piece will therefore focus on some of the more difficult aspects of being a foster sibling in the hope that in future, they too will no longer need fixing.

Preparing to foster

Preparing to become a foster family was apparently long and arduous, although my siblings and I were relatively uninvolved. I recall only two instances where my sister and I spoke with a social worker without our parents present. The first occasion was during a visit from our family social worker. Following a lengthy conversation with my parents in a different room, she joined my sister and myself in front of the television, asked us three questions, and left, apparently satisfied with our brief responses. The second occasion came shortly before our parents went in front of the fostering panel. Home barely long enough to change out of our school uniform, we were taken by car to a training evening forty-five minutes from our home. Whilst our parents underwent safe caring training elsewhere in the building, we went into a room with other prospective foster siblings. Our training group was mixed, and I was the eldest by at least seven years. Over the course of ninety minutes, we discussed which celebrity we would be if we could be anyone, and what a child coming to stay with us might need to know about our house.

For the younger children in the room, it was an age-appropriate introduction to considering the needs of others. However, as a sixteen-year-old I felt woefully unprepared for life with foster siblings based on this session which, it transpired, was the extent of the training and support I would receive from social services. Given that my parents were undergoing training around safe caring practices to protect themselves from false allegations and accusations, it seemed strange that I was given no such guidance. The fragments of information that filtered down from my parents’ training experiences served only to make me nervous of allegations, rather than provide any strategies to provide a mutually safe care environment. I am not alone in feeling unprepared. Studies from the UK have

highlighted this issue previously with 75% of young people in one study saying they wished they had more preparation (Fox, 2001; Spears & Cross, 2003). The information that foster siblings request is not generally complex, rather better explanations of behavioural issues foster children may arrive with, what to expect from fostering, and a better understanding of why children come into care (Serbinski & Shlonsky, 2014). Personally, I feel I would have benefitted from training in these domains, gaining earlier insight into behaviours and being better prepared to fulfil the role of older foster sibling. Training on safe caring practices would also provide a more robust framework for caring as a household without relying on second-hand information from foster parents.

The two interactions I did have with social services were also inadequate for another reason: had I held any objections to the situation, these were the only opportunities I had to raise them outside of my parents' supervision. This is an issue that has been raised internationally, with children and young people often reporting a lack of involvement in the decision-making process (Höjer, 2004; Serbinski & Shlonsky, 2014; Targowska et al., 2016). In my case, I was a willing traveller on the road to fostering, although, I felt in the eyes of social services, I was a passenger. For those less willing, I wonder whether these two brief interactions with unknown social workers would be sufficient to flag their concerns.

Disruption to normal family life

We had been warned to expect a large degree of disruption during our assessment period and coming home to find social workers visiting became normal. I had expected, however, that this disruption would dissipate following registration. The emergency nature of many of our placements perhaps played a part in our experiences, but I found fostering to be a stark contrast to normal family life.

Routines changed almost weekly, adapting to the needs of the children in our care. The schedule was set around contact visits and their transport to school, which was often in another town. Finding strange people in the house on returning from school became the norm as everything from routine visits to caseworker team meetings were held in the house. On occasion it felt more like a conference centre than a family home as numerous adults asked for the Wi-Fi password and directions to the bathroom. On a personal level, it was frustrating as our household rules, values, and culture seemed to come second to the needs of the local authority care team. One afternoon I returned from school to watch eight adults walk on our beige carpet in wet, muddy shoes: a big faux pas in my family as in many. I was then locked out of the dining room for the duration of their meeting, eating my dinner perched on the kitchen worksurface to accommodate them.

Being approved for emergency placements could also have an unsettling effect on the household dynamic. Our parents, faced with distressed children in the back of a social worker's car in the early hours, were not likely to turn them away. However, in doing so, there was no opportunity to discuss the placement with us, no opportunity to consider the impact on the status quo, and no chance to prepare us for the behavioural or emotional issues these children may present with. These are all factors that the literature notes as important in promoting a stable placement in a household with fostering children (Höjer & Nordenfors, 2004; Ingrid Höjer et al., 2013). Yet, on more than one occasion I went to sleep in a house filled with only family and awoke to find two new children sitting at the breakfast table.

Like many foster siblings, my own role in the family also changed once we became a fostering family (Nordenfors, 2016; Watson & Jones, 2002). Previously, I had been the older sibling to a nine-year-old and had the responsibilities that came with that: making packed lunches for school, ironing school uniform, and occasionally babysitting. With the arrival of younger foster siblings, many under the age of five, I found myself frequently tasked with helping provide more complex care. It was a strange dynamic and I often felt more like a parent than a peer. At sixteen, I was neither friend nor playmate to the toddlers and five-year olds; I was another adult. I helped them with their basic homework, made their dinner, helped to bath them, and read bedtime stories. I would babysit them, providing entertainment and games. I would praise them when they coloured in a picture, and I would tell them off when they misbehaved. To social services, I was not a parent, but to those children I was also not a peer. I was not legally responsible for their care, and yet I played a role in providing it. This is in no way a unique dynamic. Several studies in this area have commented on the supportive role foster siblings play in maintaining a placement (Höjer, 2004; I Höjer et al., 2013; Nuske, 2010; Serbinski & Shlonsky, 2014; Twigg & Swan, 2007; Williams, 2017). It is also reflective of wider societal patterns where older siblings, especially older sisters, frequently assume a caring role when it comes to their siblings (Sanders, 2017; Wikle et al., 2018). But in a fostering household, this dynamic brings a unique set of challenges.

The toddlers in our care were not your average children; they were staying with us because their parental home was not able to provide the care they needed. This was often due to some form of abuse, neglect, family illness, bereavement or family breakdown (Office for National Statistics, 2021). As a result, many of the children displayed signs of behavioural or emotional issues making the provision of care more challenging (Ford et al., 2007; Sawyer et al., 2007; Vostanis et al., 2008). As a sixteen-year-old with no experience of caring for children with behavioural disorders, it was a swift introduction to the world of children's mental health. As other fostering children have reported, I

found it difficult seeing these behaviours impact on other members of my family as the distressed children lashed out at my parents (Pugh, 1996; Thompson & McPherson, 2011; Watson & Jones, 2002).

These challenges could arguably have been mitigated by two factors. The first would be the provision of suitable training for foster siblings explaining how problem behaviours manifest and how to help manage them. Such training would serve to prepare foster siblings for the challenges of placement, whilst also recognising the role that they play in the care of children in the home. This acknowledgement is something I craved as a teenager and I am not alone in this (Adams et al., 2018; Twigg & Swan, 2007). Secondly, I feel I would have benefitted from some age-appropriate background on the children in our home. I recognise that this suggestion is a contentious topic with regards to data protection and confidentiality; after all, the children have a right to privacy and should not have their familial issues broadcast to anyone who asks. However, alongside appropriate training, some basic information on their background would have provided a contextual basis for the behaviour and thus the ability to rationalise it.

The Fostering Network raised both of these recommendations in a 2008 policy paper, alongside international efforts to give foster siblings a voice to shape the support they would receive (Clare et al., 2006; Fostering Network, 2008; Targowska et al., 2016). However, in each case the focus is primarily on issues raised by younger children. These issues are valid, representing a large proportion of the young people involved in fostering, however, they do not address the needs of older siblings who are involved in providing care. For someone like myself, familiar with the challenges of living with siblings, training on how to share toys and parental affections was of little value. Instead, I craved more focussed training to support the caring role I was assuming as an older sibling.

Safeguarding

Understanding the history of the children in our care would have benefitted other aspects of my interaction with them. At sixteen, I was too young to be given information on any abuse they may have suffered, but I was old enough to know that there are many reasons to be looked after. Consequently, I was cautious in my interaction, acutely aware that an innocuous comment or action could be reminiscent of a negative past experience and trigger a trauma response. Would chasing a toddler around the room be a fun game, or remind them of an incident of physical abuse? Would a game of hide and seek with a six-year-old be enjoyable, or would it provoke anxiety as they struggle to find one of their caregivers? Every word I said, every game I initiated, I considered carefully beforehand. Aside from impacting on any sense of normal family life, it also created a moderate

amount of anxiety in my everyday interactions. I cared for these young people, I felt responsible, and I did not want to cause them any more harm or distress than they had already endured.

I was also not privy to other arrangements in place, such as those surrounding contact for specific children. I knew from conversations with my parents that there were different forms that birth parent contact could take, and that it was important that I did not share details of who was staying with us to safeguard them. However, when it came to the care plans of specific children, I was not given any information regarding the type and frequency of contact they would have. Perhaps this was supposed to be disseminated through my parents, although in the midst of adjusting to a new placement and caring for children with complex needs, this could be easily missed. I was alarmed, therefore, to answer the landline phone one evening to a birth parent enquiring as to whether their children were present. It later transpired that the birth parents were permitted phone contact with the children, although I remained anxious about giving away too much information when answering the phone.

Alongside my subjective anxiety came an objective challenge. During one short-term placement, whilst helping two toddlers get ready for bed, one of them disclosed prior abuse. One of my parents was in another room across the landing, out of earshot but in line of sight, meaning I was the only one to hear this disclosure. I had received no training or guidance on how to receive a disclosure, nor had I been informed of either my obligations or the process for reporting it. I had no idea how to react, what to say, or whether to ask any further questions. Aside from my personal discomfort in receiving a disclosure, there are wider-reaching issues to consider. There is precedent in the literature of foster siblings being the one to receive a disclosure of abuse, particularly during periods of play (Williams, 2017). Yet, despite being in this position, foster siblings are not routinely trained in what to do next. Without this knowledge, there is a risk that foster siblings may either react badly, or keep the confidence of the young people in the household and fail to report the abuse which could impact on the ongoing safety of the looked after child (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Spears & Cross, 2003).

In addition to policies and procedures, there was an emotional reaction to contend with. Like many foster siblings, I cared for the wellbeing of the young people who joined our family. With a sudden disclosure of abuse I felt angry on behalf of my foster sibling, a reaction that is not uncommon (Höjer, 2004). Whilst I could approach my parents to discuss these concerns, I was worried, like many children who foster, of adding to their burden (Adams et al., 2018; Clare et al., 2006). Furthermore, support outside of the household was not accessible. I could not discuss the disclosure with friends and peers, partly due to data protection issues and partly because I felt they would not understand. I had no social worker designated to support me. For my parents as foster carers, there were support group meetings and a social worker at the end of the phone. For my younger sister, there were foster sibling

activity days where she could talk openly with other children who understood. At sixteen, I fit into neither category, too old to spend the day on a bouncy castle, but not old enough to be a foster carer. Therefore, like many foster siblings, I internalised the emotion and kept quiet (Adams et al., 2018; Höjer & Nordenfors, 2004; Ingrid Höjer et al., 2013).

Conclusion

So, what is the role of a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old foster sibling? In my experience, I was part of the care team supporting my parents in caring for young children; a perspective that other foster siblings and researchers have shared (Berridge, 1997; Nordenfors, 2016). Yet, when it came to legal protection, training, and support, I was grouped in with much younger children who had far less responsibility. At a period in life where independence and agency were increasing, alongside greater responsibility, there was no recognition from social services of the role that I and other teenagers play in supporting foster placements.

Through reflecting on my own experiences I aim to open a discussion around this contentious topic. It has been many years since I was a teenager; the events discussed in this reflection occurred in the late 2000s. Yet, whilst I would hope that the negative experiences discussed here were artefacts of the past, more recent evidence suggests that is not the case. Young people are reporting the same challenges arising from being foster siblings as I experienced more than a decade ago (Adams et al., 2018; Nordenfors, 2016; Nuske, 2010; Serbinski, 2017; Thompson & McPherson, 2011). More recent international work has sought to address these issues, yet does not address the relatively unique challenges faced by older foster siblings (Targowska et al., 2016).

What is perhaps more disconcerting is that nothing I have said in this paper is new; all these issues have been raised before in the literature and yet the issues persist. For more than thirty years the children of foster carers have spoken about their role and experiences, the same themes being reiterated in each paper. It is necessary, therefore, that this discussion is highlighted, and that critical questions are raised to be addressed by the academic and practitioner community. The Children Act 1989 is for the wellbeing of all children, not only those who are looked after. It is therefore imperative that we support foster siblings appropriately and ensure that, in serving the needs of looked after young people, we do not do a disservice to other young people in fostering households.

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