

Quick Guide

FOSTER CARE PRACTICE GUIDE

This Guide relates predominantly to Outcome 4 of the National Framework: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. It also relates to Outcome 1: families stay together and get the help they need, and Outcome 3: children are supported by their family network.

INTRODUCTION

This Practice Guide has been produced to assist all those with corporate parenting responsibilities across multi-agency partnerships to achieve the outcomes of the Children's Social Care National Framework by commissioning, prioritising, and expanding access to evidence-based support for foster carers. This includes senior leaders and commissioners in children's social care, health, and education, as well as the wider fostering sector, such as voluntary organisations and independent fostering providers.

This Guide contains actionable key principles and recommendations for senior leaders.

- **Key principles** help to ensure that accessible, acceptable, evidence-based support for foster carers can be effectively implemented. They draw out qualitative evidence on the views, experiences, and preferences of foster carers in the UK on how to engage and work with them. They also cover qualitative evidence on effective design and implementation of interventions for foster carers.
- **Recommendations** summarise the best-evidenced support and training for improving outcomes for foster carers and the children in their care. We only make recommendations where at least one rigorous impact evaluation has evidenced that the intervention achieves positive outcomes for foster carers in the UK or in countries with similar children's social care systems to the UK.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Key principle 1: Create a coordinated network of support for foster families.

Why? Foster carers consistently valued support that brings together different forms of help and builds a community around the foster family, e.g. approaches that combine practical advice, opportunities for short breaks, emotional support, and timely referrals to other services. Foster carers appreciated support that involved other practitioners and that recognised foster carers as part of a child's wider support network. Carers also highlighted the value of involving the whole foster family in support. Our expert advisors for this Practice Guide additionally highlighted that financial support is crucial for foster families.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should commission a broad range of support for foster families, develop flexible short breaks packages, conduct multi-disciplinary needs assessments to inform service design, and create clear support pathways and the conditions for effective collaboration between key adults in a child's life.
- **Supervising social workers** and **other practitioners** should work with foster families to identify and support a wider network, enabling shared caring responsibilities.

Key principle 2: Ensure support is delivered by practitioners who are warm, passionate, and empathetic, and who approach foster carers as equal partners.

Why? Foster carers get the most out of support when it is delivered by those who are empathetic, open, and warm, and when they feel that their own knowledge and expertise are valued. Peer facilitators, alone or alongside practitioners, help build trust and empathy through shared experience. Support that treats foster carers as equal partners, and values their role within the wider fostering system, can empower them to advocate more confidently for children in their care.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should promote strengths-based, relational approaches, treat foster carers as equal partners, recognising their skills and expertise, and provide opportunities for peer-facilitated support and mentoring.
- **Supervising social workers** and **other practitioners** should support foster carers with warmth, passion, and empathy, recognising and valuing their knowledge and expertise and treating them as equal partners; they should also support foster carers to become peer facilitators and mentors, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

Key principle 3: Offer facilitated peer support, which is valued by foster carers as important for their emotional wellbeing.

Why? Regular opportunities for peer support facilitated by either a social worker or a foster carer was felt by foster carers to enhance their emotional wellbeing. Foster carers see each other as valuable sources of support, drawing on shared experiences and practical insights from people who truly understand the realities of fostering. Foster carers appreciated group-based peer support where the children in their care were also welcome. Children in foster care also appreciated the ‘family-like’ feeling of group-based support where they can connect with other children in similar situations.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should provide a diverse range of peer support opportunities for foster carers, including those with provision for children in care.
- **Supervising social workers, other practitioners, and practice supervisors** should actively promote opportunities for facilitated peer support and encourage foster carers to take up facilitator roles.

Key principle 4: Support foster carers’ own needs, enabling them to provide children with stable, loving care.

Why? Foster carers frequently reported that support for self care was often missing from the help they received, yet it was greatly valued when included. Supporting carers to attend to their own needs is essential to enable them to provide safe, consistent care, and to sustain high quality, stable relationships with the children they care for. Foster carers valued opportunities to reflect on their experiences and the emotional responsibilities of fostering, but finding time and space for this can be difficult while balancing children’s needs, meetings, and other daily responsibilities. Self care should form one part of a wider, coordinated, and accessible support offer.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should offer support that recognises foster carers’ own needs and provides practical solutions, and equip the workforce to use strengths-based, relational approaches to support foster carer wellbeing.
- **Supervising social workers and other practitioners** should support foster carers’ wellbeing by actively exploring their needs and how these could be met, provide information and practical advice on self care, and use strengths-based, relational approaches when supporting foster families.

Key principle 5: Prioritise support that strengthens foster carers’ capacity to understand and respond sensitively to children in their care.

Why? Equipping foster carers with the skills to pause and reflect is central to sensitive, responsive care and strong carer–child relationships. Attuned caregiving helps children feel safe and supported, contributing to a warm, nurturing home environment. Foster carers found support and training most helpful when practical tools were combined with evidence-based learning on trauma, child development, and attachment. Useful

tools included emotional thermometers and ‘mind checks’ to guide positive responses. Learning how early experiences shape behaviour helped carers better understand children’s actions, increased empathy, and strengthened their ability to respond sensitively. Trauma and attachment theories should be applied carefully to avoid defining children by their past experiences.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should commission evidence-based training on trauma, attachment, and child development which includes practical tools to help foster carers respond positively to children in their care, and embed training on the latest developments in children’s social care and child development into ongoing practitioner training programmes.
- **Supervising social workers, other practitioners, and practice supervisors** should focus on building their own understanding of relevant theories, as well as the latest developments in children’s social care and child development.

Key principle 6: Provide structured support while allowing for flexibility and tailoring to individual needs.

Why? Foster carers value structured support that reflects the unique experiences and responsibilities of their role. Offering flexibility, while retaining a clear structure, ensures that support remains both evidence-informed and responsive to individual need. Universal or generic parenting support does not always meet foster carers’ needs and support should be adapted to be relevant to the specific challenges of fostering. Fostering experiences also vary to meet children’s diverse needs. Approaches should acknowledge this diversity to help ensure learning is relevant, meaningful, and applicable. Tailoring the content of support can be challenging when there is significant diversity within a group, e.g. in fostering experience or children’s ages.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should commission support for foster carers which can speak to individual challenges and requirements of the role. This might include support to care for children from a different cultural background or of different ages and developmental stages, to manage family time, or support on harms outside the home.
- **Supervising social workers and other practitioners** should offer flexibility within structured content to respond to the specific needs, questions, and experiences of foster carers.

Key principle 7: Help foster carers engage confidently with support by using a strengths-based, inclusive approach.

Why? High-quality recruitment of approved foster carers into support programmes relies on clear, accessible information, a good understanding of carers’ needs, and strengths-based, opportunity-focused framing. Clear descriptions of available support, including transparent eligibility criteria and any flexibility, help ensure a good fit between carers’ needs and programme aims. Strong communication between referrers and support providers supports a shared understanding of both the intervention and

family circumstances, making support feel relevant and worthwhile. Endorsement or involvement from social workers and fostering services increased carers' uptake and engagement, as did recommendations from other foster carers. Evidence shows limited diversity among foster carers accessing support or training, highlighting the need to engage underrepresented carers, e.g. through peer facilitation or mentoring where appropriate.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should utilise social workers and other local authority staff to endorse support and training opportunities for foster carers, champion a strengths-based culture, and build local capacity to drive forward equality, diversity, inclusion and equity efforts.
- **Supervising social workers, other practitioners, and practice supervisors** should have a good understanding of the aims and benefits of the support offer to ensure carers are referred appropriately and provided with the right information, adopt a strengths-based and personalised approach when engaging foster carers with support, and support underrepresented foster carers to engage with support and training.

Key principle 8: Provide foster carers with opportunities to put theory into practice.

Why? Foster carers appreciated opportunities to deepen their theoretical knowledge if this was paired with practical strategies that they could practice during sessions or at home and sufficient time between sessions to reflect. Methods for applying theory included role-play, group discussion, supervision, and shared reflection on practice. Advisors emphasised that theory should be used in a natural, child-centred way, so new approaches are experienced as part of supportive, attuned caregiving. Foster carers often trial new strategies during periods of crisis, which can be challenging. Advisors also noted that instability within the professional team around a child can make it harder to put theory into practice.

How?

- **Senior leaders** should commission and design services that provide opportunities for foster carers to develop their theoretical knowledge and that support them to put this into practice, and address barriers that may prevent foster carers from applying learning.
- **Supervising social workers and other practitioners** should ensure that foster carers have space to reflect on, and implement, skills and tools from evidence-based support or training, including through access to group-based discussions with other carers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE FOR EACH RECOMMENDATION		
	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
<p>1. Provide foster carers with evidence-based multi-level support to improve a range of outcomes</p> <p>Support at multiple levels – individual, group, and system – can lead to improvements, including in child behaviour, wellbeing, and placement stability. Multi-level approaches offer a broad framework to address the breadth of interconnected needs of foster families.</p>	✓		
<p>2. Provide foster carers with evidence-based positive child behaviour support to improve children’s behavioural outcomes</p> <p>Positive behaviour support for foster carers can improve children’s behavioural outcomes so their behaviour reflects improved wellbeing. It helps foster carers recognise behaviour as communication and equips them with skills to respond to children’s underlying needs.</p>	✓		
<p>3. Offer evidence-based training to support consistent foster carer–child interactions, to improve children’s development and wellbeing</p> <p>When carers are assisted to strengthen interactions and use predictable routines and expectations, children show improvements in adjustment, functioning, and wellbeing.</p>		✓	
<p>4. Provide foster carers with evidence-based self-care skills <u>and</u> positive child behaviour support to improve carer wellbeing</p> <p>Combining self care and positive behaviour approaches helps foster carers to feel better equipped and more able to cope, strengthening their capacity to provide sensitive care.</p>		✓	
<p>5. Provide foster carers with evidence-based positive child behaviour support in a group setting to improve placement stability and permanence</p> <p>Building foster carers’ skills and confidence to respond calmly in difficult moments helps them to meet children’s needs, supporting emotional regulation and secure relationships. Group-based training helps to normalise challenges and reduce isolation, strengthening carers’ capacity to provide stable, nurturing care.</p>		✓	

RECOMMENDATION	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE FOR EACH RECOMMENDATION		
	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
<p>6. Offer foster carers evidence-based, relationship-focused training to strengthen relationships with children</p> <p>This type of support helps foster carers understand the needs of children in their care, respond sensitively, and improve their own emotional regulation. This helps create secure relationships which support children’s resilience, positive behaviour, and overall wellbeing.</p>		✓	
<p>7. Build evidence-based foster carer support networks to improve retention</p> <p>Creating a supportive environment and community around foster families helps carers to feel valued, equipped, and connected, increasing the sustainability of the fostering role.</p>			✓

STRONG

A rating of ‘strong’ is given if the evidence is from a meta-analysis or a narrative synthesis of at least two randomised controlled trials or quasi-experimental studies that were conducted in the UK or comparable high-income country; and have scored low on risk of bias assessment, with a minimum sample size of 20 in each group (the intervention and comparison group); and demonstrates effectiveness of the intervention(s).

GOOD

A rating of ‘good’ is given if the evidence is from a meta-analysis or a narrative synthesis of at least two randomised controlled trials and/or quasi-experimental studies that were conducted in the UK or a comparable high-income country; and have scored at least moderate on risk of bias assessment, with at least 20 participants in the intervention group and less or more than 20 participants in the comparison group; and demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

PROMISING

A rating of ‘promising’ is given if the evidence is from one randomised controlled trial or quasi-experimental study that was conducted in the UK or a comparable high-income country; and has scored low or moderate on risk of bias assessment, with less or more than 20 participants in each group (the intervention and comparison group); and demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

Useful links

- Foster Care Practice Guide: foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides/foster-care
- Reflective tool: foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/foster-care-practice-guide-reflective-tool.pdf
- Extended definitions: foundations.org.uk/extended-definitions-foster-care-practice-guide
- Practice and policy overview: foundations.org.uk/toolkit/policy-practice-overview-foster-care-practice-guide
- Find out more about Practice Guides: <https://foundations.org.uk/about-practice-guides/>