

Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

National fostering stocktake: a review of the fostering system in England

Executive summary

- Communication and interaction skills are fundamental and foundational. They enable us to understand and to be understood. They are central to our development, our behaviour and ability to form positive relationships, our educational achievement, social interaction, and life chances.
- Many looked after children and young people have unidentified and/or unmet communication and interaction needs.
 - No Wrong Door, North Yorkshire County Council's model around 'rethinking care for adolescents', found that 66% of their children in residential care had speech, language and communication needs.¹ This is a pattern that has also been seen at ISP Childcare, an independent fostering agency, over the past twenty years. Some years up to 80% of children have been found to have communication needs.²
 - severe and pervasive communication impairment, much of it previously unidentified, has been found in children and young people in residential care.³
- Left unidentified and unsupported, communication and interaction needs put children and young people at risk of a range of negative outcomes. These can affect the stability of foster care placements and foster carers' experience of fostering, particularly where children and young people use behaviour as a form of communication.
 - 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders (social, emotional and mental health needs) have significant language deficits.⁴
 - between 40% and 54% of children with behaviour problems have language impairment.⁵
- To help improve outcomes for children and young people with communication and interaction needs a whole-system approach is required in which communication is everybody's business and barriers to communication and interaction are removed.
- Fosters carers, supported, trained and advised by speech and language therapists, have a crucial role to play in:
 - the early identification of, and appropriate response to, communication and interaction needs;
 - helping looked after children express their views and understand what is happening much more effectively, including in LAC reviews and other relevant meetings.
- Foster carers, and all other professionals working with looked after children, should have access to dedicated speech and language therapy services to support the early identification of communication and interaction needs, including knowing when to refer someone to a speech and language therapist for a full assessment to support differential diagnosis, training in how to respond appropriately to those needs, and 1:1 support for those children and young people with more complex communication and interaction needs.
- Local good practice examples of foster carers being supported by speech and language therapists are detailed below.
- In our evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into fostering⁶, we recommended that the Government's review of foster care should consider:
 - what level of support currently exists for foster carers, and others supporting looked after children, to recognise and respond to children and young

people's individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs;

- how improvements can be made in the early identification of and support for children and young people's individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs;
- what skill set, support and training foster carers and those recruiting them require so they can recognise and respond appropriately to the individual needs, including the communication and interaction needs, of those in their care;
- how local good practice in supporting the communication and interaction needs of looked after children and young people can be made common practice.

Looked after children and communication and interaction needs

Looked after children and young people's communication difficulties include problems understanding language (making sense of what people say), with using language (words and sentences), and social communication (knowing how to speak to different people in the right kind of way at the right time and understanding the non-verbal rules of communication). Common difficulties they experience include naming and managing emotions (including self-control), self-awareness, vocabulary, concepts related to time, working memory and the ability to retain, process, recall and sequence information. Interaction difficulties can lead to problems developing positive relationships.

Looked after children's communication and interaction needs are often hidden. Older children in particular may have developed masking techniques for these needs and can communicate through behaviour. Attention is often paid to this visible behaviour rather than to the factors affecting it, such as communication and interaction needs. Behaviour is often a 'symptom' of these unidentified and/or unmet needs.

Left unidentified and/or unmet, communication and interaction needs can have a range of negative consequences for children and young people, including on their:

- social, emotional and mental health (SEMH);
- wellbeing/resilience ;
- ability to form attachments and positive relationships;
- ability to be involved in decisions about their care;
- ability to access learning and educational placements;
- behaviour, which can lead to offending behaviour.

Areas being looked at by the National fostering stocktake

The types of fostering that are currently provided, in order to understand the full range of provision which is available and when and for which young people it is best used.

Speech and language therapists work with a range of different types of fostering to:

- support the identification of communication and interaction needs;
- train, advise and support foster carers, and others working with looked after children, to recognise and respond appropriately to communication and interaction needs;
- support children and young people with such needs.

Local good practice of speech and language therapy services supporting foster carers includes:

- **No Wrong Door** – as part of the No Wrong Door service in North Yorkshire, a speech and language therapist (known as a communication support worker) visits foster carers who are fostering young people who have speech, language and communication needs at home. They discuss with them and the children they are looking after communication needs and how to respond to them. Training on specific areas of communication difficulty is also provided to foster carers.
- **ISP Childcare** - ISP Childcare is an independent fostering agency. It has provided speech and language therapy services for looked after children for over twenty years. This includes providing training to foster carers, as well as other professionals, about communication and interaction difficulties. Video Interaction Guidance, as recommended by NICE,^{7,8} is also used to help develop foster carers' interaction skills with children who have complex needs, including those with insecure attachments autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and conduct disorder.
- **Dunraven School** – Dunraven is a mainstream academy in Lambeth which employs speech and language therapists as part of its Integrated Inclusion Team. They regularly meet the foster carers and social workers of looked after children with known communication needs. They have input into weekly Inclusion Referral Meetings and half-termly Multi-Agency Meetings and attend Personal Education Plan meetings when communication needs are suspected to advise foster carers and social workers on the role of speech and language therapy. They also provide support for foster carers when there is a change of placement and help support the post-16 transition of looked after children with communication needs. The Lead Practitioner for Looked after Children and Safeguarding runs a Foster Care Network which includes training and awareness of attachment, trauma, and communication needs.
- **Hackney** – the local Virtual School Head has recently funded a dedicated speech and language therapist to work in the Virtual School. They will also be providing training for foster carers on how they can support their foster child's speech and language development. They have developed a speech, language and communication needs screen, trained all staff in the Virtual School in awareness of communication needs and use of the screen, and provide varying levels of direct and indirect therapy. Care leavers will be able to access speech and language therapy services if they fit the remit for the Virtual School service, which is up to 21 or up to 25 if they continue in education.

What works best within fostering settings to improve outcomes for the children and young people placed.

To ensure outcomes for children and young people are improved it is essential that their individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs, are identified as early as possible and responded to appropriately. This would help promote stability of foster placement and positive fostering experiences for both children and young people and their foster carers. Left unidentified and unsupported communication and interaction needs put children and young people at risk of a range of negative consequences, including poorer outcomes, placement breakdown, and can lead to a negative experience for foster carers.

Based on the experience and expertise of our members supporting looked after children, we recommend that foster settings, and the wider team of professionals working with children in care, have access to dedicated speech and language therapy services. This would support a 'identification, train, support' model in which:

- **identification** - children and young people's communication and interaction needs were identified when they entered, or were on the edge of, care, this would also support differential diagnosis;

- **train** - those looking after children and young people in care, including foster carers, were trained to recognise and respond appropriately to their needs, including through making adjustments to their own communication and interaction style;
- **support** - those caring for looked after children were supported to respond appropriately to their individual needs and children and young people with more complex needs were able to access speech and language therapy.

What improvements could be made to the way that fostering provision is commissioned, delivered, regulated and inspected to improve outcomes and value for money;

The commissioning and delivery of fostering provision could be improved if specialist services were commissioned and access to them provided to fostering settings to enable the identification of the totality of children's individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs. Regulation and inspection of fostering provision should include regulation and inspection of how those settings are:

- identifying children's individual needs;
- responding to children's needs, including through what support is provided to foster carers;
- seeking, recording and demonstrating how they have responded to children and young people's views on the support they are receiving.

If children and young people's communication and interaction needs are identified early and appropriately responded to, this should improve outcomes for them as well as reduce the risk of negative outcomes, including placement breakdown, lack of educational attainment, behavioural and social, emotional and mental health problems, and potential involvement in the criminal justice system.

- looked after children with a range of needs, including communication needs, are overrepresented in the care and criminal justice system.⁹
- 60% of young people in the youth justice estate have communication needs.¹⁰

This should also deliver value for money and savings to education, health and justice.

The status, role and function of foster carers in relation to other professionals as part of the team working with a child in care;

Trained, supported and advised by speech and language therapists, foster carers have a key role to play in the early identification of children and young people's individual's communication and interaction needs, and in responding to them appropriately.

To achieve this, it is essential that the team of professionals working with children in care has access to dedicated speech and language therapy services. This would support early identification of communication and interaction needs. It would also support foster carers to:

- recognise and respond to communication and interaction needs, whatever the age of those they are caring for, whether young children or adolescents.
- support language development, including developing the functional skills children and young people need in a domestic environment such as reading, literacy, numeracy, time-telling, organisation, and appropriate social communication skills.
- support adolescents with communication and interaction needs.
- understand the relationship between language and behaviour and social, emotional and mental health.

It is also essential that all relevant parties, including local authorities and private fostering agencies, share information with foster carers in a timely manner about children and young people's needs. Foster carers should also be facilitated to meet all relevant professionals, including where appropriate speech and language therapists, as early as possible in the child or young person's placement so they are fully aware of their needs, know how best to

respond to them, and are aware of the professional services that exist to support them and the children and young people they are fostering.

How the experiences of young people can be improved when entering foster care, transitioning between placements (between carers or into other settings), and leaving foster care;

Young peoples' experiences can be improved when entering foster care, transitioning between placements (between carers or into other settings), and leaving foster care if their individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs, are identified and responded to appropriately.

Entering care

To help promote improved outcomes, placement stability, positive fostering experiences for children and young people and their foster carers, it is essential that:

- children and young people's individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs, are identified when they enter, or are on the edge of care;
- those needs are responded to appropriately;
- specialist support is available to children and young people with more complex needs, and to foster carers so they can support the children and young people in their care.

Transitioning between placements

Transitions can be particularly stressful times for children and young people, particularly so for those with communication and interaction needs. Given the impact of these needs on attachment and the ability to form positive relationships, speech and language therapists have a key role to play. They can support the development of strategies for supporting young people through transitions and staff changes. They can also train and support those working with young people, including foster carers, in knowing how to respond appropriately to an individual's particular communication and interaction needs, so they can develop positive relationships with them.

Leaving care

It is essential that those leaving care who have identified needs continue to receive appropriate support to prevent them being at risk of a range of negative consequences.

Any other issues which might contribute to better outcomes for children.

The identification of, appropriate response to, and provision of support for children and young people's individual needs, including their communication and interaction needs, would contribute to better outcomes for children. It is essential that foster carers are trained, advised, and supported to recognise the needs of the children and young people in their care by relevant specialists. This should include the provision of specialist services to support the identification of needs and responding to them appropriately.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) is the professional body for speech and language therapists, speech and language therapy students and support workers working in the UK. The RCSLT currently has almost 17,000 members. We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care, and justice policies.

This submission is based on the experience and expertise of our members who work with looked after children. Their work typically includes screening and assessing children and young people for communication and interaction needs, providing training and support to

those who support children and young people in care, including foster carers, and providing speech and language therapy to those children and young people with more complex needs.

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