Participant: F1

Title: How do foster carers and teachers attribute the challenging behaviour of Looked after children?

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Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant F1 (P)

Age: 65

Sex: M

Foster Carer: 14-16 years

I: Awesome thank you, erm, I’ll get the boring demographic bits out of the way if that’s alright. Do you mind just stating age, sex and years being a foster carer?

P: Right my name is X I am 65 years old. erm we’ve been a foster carer for quite a time now we’ve done two stints we started when our boys or just before our boys were married, before they were born sorry, and so that was for about six or seven years erm and we’ve been doing it recently for about another eight years or so, eight or nine years I think.

I: Ahh ok, awesome. And so, for the purposes of this conversation, if it’s possible to focus on just one looked after child that you’ve got with you at the moment, because I think you’ve got, is it three, with you.

P: We have yes

I: If it’s possible to focus this conversation around one in particular, em given that we’re thinking more about behaviour and that side of things I don’t know if that leads you to think more about one....

P: Would you like one that we’ve had behavioural issues with or...

I: Erm, yes, or just one that you’ve had more recently, even if the behaviour isn’t particularly significant.

P: Well we’ll do different ones, so XX (speaking to partner) which one would you like to do.

Partner: I don’t mind, why don’t you do the little one

P: X? ok

Partner: Because there are certain behaviours that he has

P: Yes

I: How old is X?

P: Err, X is 7

I: Ahh, and how long has he been with you

P: He’s been with us for... is it nearly four years dear?

Partner: Yes, and he’s eight

P: Oh, he’s eight sorry!

I: That’s alright, time moves on so quickly these days! So, you know him very well then.

P: Yeah, we’ve had him half of sort of his existence.

I: Gosh, ok. How would you, we’ll start off seemingly simply but potentially not. How would you describe X?

P: He’s a lovely character, he’s bubbly, he’s got a lot of energy, very friendly, very interested in certain things, he’s erm, a great Lego maker, he likes reading books, he's just a nice chap to be with. Nice kid.

I: Oh lovely, good, what about his behaviours, what are they like, good, bad, challenging, not so?

P: Well we’re very lucky, we’re very lucky with the guys that we have with us, they’re all long term now but the behaviour on the whole is very good. One or two times we have one or two issues but when you consider what other families have to deal with, other looked after families, whether you consider what other so-called ordinary families have to deal with even with their own kids well then there are no problems, no great problems anyway.

Partner: (What about when they first came... – oh sorry!)

P: Yeah well when they first came yeah, he was totally different, he um, he I dare say you would describe him as feral almost. He didn’t speak, he erm, I think he used to say one word I can’t remember whether it was...he just to grunt I remember that. His head was down, he used to look at you through sort of eyes that were almost closed, and he seemed to be in like a bit of a rage. You could tell he wasn’t well looked after, his skin was in a terrible state very rough, very cracked. He was itching all over, bleeding in fact where he was scratching. Um, he err, he used to poo himself, he hadn’t quite sort of, I think he was still in nappies when he first came which was quite late. Erm, yes so there was that erm that issue. And I remember when they first came, we weren’t given a great deal of information on the kids. And I think this is like an issue perhaps a lot of foster carers say, although perhaps, just going slightly off piste a bit, if you were given all the information, you might be put off some kids. Y'know the older one we’ve got if you were told oh well he’s all the things that he had and all the issues and various things you’d have thought no I wouldn’t touch him with a barge pole, and yet you couldn’t wish to meet a nicer bloke, so you know its both, it’s sort of swings both ways.

I: Yeah, it’s hard isn’t it. So, when X came and first joined you, and as you said that first head down the grunting all those sorts of things, what did you make of that at the time, what was your thinking about that behaviour, why it was there, what was going on for him?

P: We’d been given like err, I say a rough indication, we’d been told that all the issues of the family, he’d suffered a lot of abuse, neglect and you could see that these were sort of issues relating to that. And so as soon as we sort of kicked in doing our normal thing, the behaviour started to change, and it changed quite quick. And I think at home, I say, he was virtually sort of left I think, obviously he’s a different colour to the other chaps, he was black and got a feeling that there might have been a bit of issues in the home about that. Erm, whether or not they used to talk to him or not but here everyone’s talking all the time erm so that sort of gradually got better and better. But the underlying issues and the age of the child this is the thing that were still dealing with now and I think this is the issue with so much, all the courses we’ve been on since, you hear all the developmental paths that these children have happens really early on, 3 months 6 months a year, so erm whether or not he’ll ever get back to so-called normal I don’t know.

I: Yeah, what, it’s interesting to hear you talk about how the behaviour changed quite quickly when he moved in here with the things that you put in place. What would you say you guys are doing here that kind of lead to some of that transition?

P: Well I think that we have a structure here, there is, X and I are both of the same thinking on that, and that’s a good thing as well because we’re both on the same place and there is a structure of what is expected kids to do and erm they either learn from what we do , or if they are doing things we say to them, this is not quite right, this is what you do. And you can say this you don’t have to shout and scream and do all these other things. I think so long as that’s in place and then if you give them a loving environment a nourishing environment, a clean environment, then everything sort of works out.

I: Mm, absolutely, so you talked about kind of the environmental side of things, is that something that you think is particularly important?

P: Yeah, I do, it’s another one of these things isn’t it because there’s always this, again you see all these programmes on TV, nature and nurture, is it part of the DNA if they said its part of the DNA of the family then that will always be there, and erm, to an extent the way you are, I think is down to a lot of things, it’s down to a lot of luck really, it’s down to what family you’re born into, what the family are like, you know, their environment. The area they live, the people they meet, the people you meet, erm, school you go to, lots of other, all these things have a big sort of play I think in what people turn out to be, and not only that but then the values you stick on, I think erm that we have fairly good values, it’s a strange thing, you know, I’m not, I think both X and I have a certain moral code, I wouldn’t say that we’re ultra-religious, I’m C of E with a very small C, I don’t go to church although we do, there are certain codes that you work along. We’re both retired police so I dare say that is, although saying that I don’t think we’re all rules and regulations and most of the people that I worked with weren’t like that. You know there is sort of a base that you’re geared into, but within reason erm so long as nobody else is being erm hurt or anything, you can do what you wish I think that’s the thing, so long as it complies with all the general norms. That type of thing.

I: Yeah ok, that’s interesting. How do you think what you’ve just described there in terms of kind of partly the balance between nature and nurture that we were talking about, but also the part of the values and environment, how does that or does that do you think impact on your choices in terms of behaviour management? So those times when maybe there is something more challenging happening?

P: Yeah its interesting because erm, you know 30 years of dealing with quite challenging behaviour and whereas most people would walk away or run away from a lot of these things, we used to walk towards it, and you, you had a, you worked a system on how to deal with it, you couldn’t go in like a bull in a china shop, you had to try and gauge the situation very quickly and then temper it with how you would deal with it, it could be using humour, I used to talk a lot, now and again in our old job it did get a little bit physical, but all these sort of things, and you know the best way is to try and resolve things. And so, I could understand, I think the first thing you've got to do on a lot of these things is, things happen and you take a step back, mentally take a step back, and you think well, whatever scenario is put in front of you there’s usually a reason why these things happen, and so you think well, is it something we’ve been doing, something they’ve just done and you think well I’ll try and remove that issue away from a start. If it’s something more fundamental then you have to think is it something they’ve learnt from when they were at home, erm, cause these things have a weird thing you think even with kids that we’ve had for some time every now and again they’ll do something, and even though we’ve said and pointed them in various directions, these things will still happen and you think, well is it them, part of what they learnt, was it some sort of device they had to gain attention, or a hundred and one different things, a hundred and one different things why these things, sometimes there is a reason, sometimes there is no reason, erm, but when they occur, I think the first thing is, and the way we both do, its dealt with, but its dealt with in a reasonable way, you know none of us, you know we’re not of that character where we’re gonna shout or scream and go mad and obviously as foster carers that are rules that, what you should do and what you’re not allowed to do, and then we go on all the courses that they say to try and assist us anyway.

I: Yeah oh good. I was just wondering as you said you’ve encountered you know professionally as well, quite a lot of challenging behaviour whether that means that some of the behaviour you see, do you think that’s changed your perception as to at what kind of threshold it considered challenging. As in whereas someone else might look at it and say oh I would find that really challenging, but because of your background maybe not so, or....

P: Yes and no again, I don’t think, yeah, I dealt with things you wouldn’t want to know, and having dealt with them, I don’t think I think all these terrible things I can stand a lot more trouble here, no there is a limit as to, there is a set way of living that you do, it’s just that having experienced that then I think we’re more able to deal with it, but strangely enough, and going again off piste a bit, the one lad we had who erm was the most challenging I’ve ever dealt with was in all the things that I’ve done, I think of it now every now and again thinking it was too challenging for us, in as much as we knew that the situation these kids had been involved with was very complex it was erm physical, mental, sexual, all terrible terrible things had taken place and this kid was seven years old, younger than X, and but you could see there was something not quite switched in with him. One minute he was one thing, one minute he was another thing, couldn’t walk down the road without getting a stick and hitting things with it. Going to the park, you’d erm, he’d be in the park 30 seconds he’d be playing around, another 30 seconds he’d be having a chat with a kid, another 30 seconds he’d be throwing stones at them or something like this and I can remember without that, we took him to a farm, an open day at a farm, and had a great day, doing all different things and then right at the end, we were walking back to the car, and there was a horse, and he was going to walk right behind this horse and I said hang on mate, and just went to grab him and say oh watch the horse, and that changed him, and from then on it went from bad to worse and in the end we had to go home, he was kicking, swearing, terrible, you’ve never seen anything like it, come back here throwing things around, hitting his head, we used to have like mirrors, similar to these in his room, and he’d be hitting his head on these mirrors, we had venetian blinds, you know strangling, putting them around his neck and strangling himself, but so extreme behaviour, and this lad in the end, he wasn’t with us long, he had to go to not even another family he had to go to one of these units for very damaged children, which I think he’s still at. So erm, yes, so you’re original question about...

I: No no its fine its useful to go off tangents sometimes. And so, how, what did you make of that behaviour at the time?

P: Well, you know what it was, and although I’ve done all sorts of things job wise I've never been involved in anything like that with a child so young and it was so extreme, and you thought blimey mate, we’ve got set things we tried, I remember when he first came we knew that there were all these issues and we go through all the stages of dealing with disruptive behaviour you know you’ve got all the rewards for various things and treats for various things, but we’d exhausted all those and I think it was the sudden realisation that this was a relay race, and we’d run our leg and it was somebody else’s turn to do their bit.

I: Yeah, absolutely, what about, if I can pin us down more specifically to that time you said when you were at the farm and you said you kind of going behind the horse and you were trying to protect him, and as you said it went from bad to worse from there what do you think was happening, why do you think that change of behaviour happened?

P: I don’t know erm, because you would think if it was our birth children and you did that it would be the normal thing to do, and so, I think that’s the shock initially when you think why do people behave like this when you’re trying to save them, but this is the thing because you’re dealing with kids that are erm perhaps troubled and this is the other things I think now especially with a lot of the foster kids that are coming in, I can say that the issues surrounding the foster kids on the second time we did it our vastly different from the issues the first item, they were kids that had no problems really at all, whereas now it’s very very complex, you know, you don’t see the, well these the ones we’ve got now are very complex but behaviour wise they’re very good.

I: Ok. So, do you think that kind of, those different needs specifically within the child has led to different behaviours that you see, like the difference you’ve seen as you’ve said between less challenging behaviour now than before.

P: Yeah, I think, well it would go I would dare say to how you develop and your learning from the very early age, and we can say that for a lot of these kids a lot of the things that we do normally when you have children of your own these people don’t experience at all they don’t experience any interaction with the birth family, they don’t you know a lot of them there’s usually only one member which is hard blimey its hard enough with two. When you’re trying to do it with one, and if they’ve got all these other issues that a lot of these kids seem to have. Erm, yeah it’s an issue and whether that’s because they’re not the birth families are not trained themselves, you know they’ve brought up in the way that they weren’t told, and they’re unable to do it, and I think we can find that with X, you know, his mum is really unable, you know the way she is she is unable to understand and comprehend perhaps what she should of done and her environment that she was in wasn’t a healthy environment anyway to bring a family up and they didn’t have any other assistance that everybody else has, you know from a partner, other members of your family, it’s very hard, well it’s impossible, not very hard, it’s impossible.

I: Yeah, absolutely, how do you think that, do you think those experiences that affects a child in their development when they’re really young and little, how much do you think that can be changed of shifted or can it at all?

P: Well yeah I think it can to an extent, erm and you’d have to do a long evaluation on a child and take in thousands of people to see whether it can be, I err it’s hard because as I say every now and again, no matter what you do they react in a certain way. The older brother of this one he still keeps sort of pulling back. And you think why, why do you do this and so is that that could be the way the family behaved, the things they did the reason he’s acting like that is because he had to do that whilst he was in that environment. The X he is learning because it’s quite funny now, X especially and X will come out with phrases that you know if I close my eyes I think it’s either X talking or me, you know, there’s certain things that we’ve said or do that come out. You know I can’t think of any off hand now, ask X when you speak to her.

I: I know what you mean, they’re the ones that you don’t realise you say until you hear a child parrot it back to you.

P: Yeah and these and its all the way we are and the way we live, and so I think it can do, and you can reinforce what you consider and what is considered acceptable and the norm in behaviour, but erm, you know we go on a lot of these courses, well X especially, she’s just been on one with they’re looked after children, but they’re adopted children usually by family members, you know grannies and things like this or other people who have got adopted children and they have less help then we do, and they’re in real states some of these people, because some of these children are you know they are suffering worse or as bad as some of the children we’ve had but they’ve got no support dealing with it. So in that stage is that part of the deal you know, or whether it’s if a child is taken out of the problem early enough you know this is the other thing, whether or not on the one hand they say it’s best to keep the child with the family and intervene and try and assist with the family, I dare say it would cost less. But on saying that you know that’s not always the best for the child because potentially they’ve got, they can thrive in a good environment. And then you think well even if they’re taken out early its usually a year and a half two years three years, which is too late according to, even then. And then they say you’ve got to keep all the families together, well we know for a fact that the one we had before the worst thing keeping that family together. So that runs against all what you should do, which is weird because you’d have though year keep them in, so I don’t know each individual case has got to be taken on its own merit.

I: Yeah, yeah absolutely, I think that really important isn’t it. Ok, just one final question really, just to wrap up, do you have kind of a favourite or a particular happy member of the time with the looked after children, is there something that particularly stands out as a nice experience.

P: Yeah, it’s nice to see them thrive, there’s no doubt about that it is nice to see them thrive, and I think the environment here you know you can’t say everybody’s laughing and smiling and happy all the time but generally it is you know people are laughing and smiling and are being very happy, and we’re lucky we do a lot we do a lot of different things we go out a lot, we’ve had some fantastic holidays, erm, some really good times, you know I think we’ve had things that stand out in my mind are our holidays at the holiday camp over in the Isle of Wight erm, which is very basic but brilliant fun, and what do we do? Not a great deal really, we sit and the naff-ist sort of park, which is such fun, what’s the name of that park X?

Partner: Black Gang Chine

P: Black Gang Chine

I: Oh yes, I know the one!

P: And things like that, and they have such great fun, and its watching them enjoy themselves and you think yeah for all you know it makes it worthwhile I think, people come up and say, you know people often come up and say, I wouldn’t do your job oh you’re a saint and all this and I say, it’s not that, because I get as much pleasure having the kids with us as I dared say from the other way around as it were so erm were lucky really. The erm, the older lad erm well I’m a railway nut, I don’t know if I told you I go round to all these railways and things and erm, so we often go out to Ruislip lido and all these places with the trains but the older one I’m going to take because for a special thing for him, he comes out with me and my mum and we travel further afield and he keeps coming out at the moment “when are off to wales to see this particular railway”, so it works out, in good ways.

I: Ahh its sounds lovely, thank you very much.

P: That’s quite alright.