Participant: F2

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

Date: 29/03/2019

Length: 24:00

Location: Participants home

Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant F2 (P)

Age: 59

Sex: F

Foster Carer: 14-16 years

I: Thank you very much, to start off with we’ll get the boring bits out of the way, do you mind just letting me know your age, and how long you’ve been a foster carer for.

P: Right so I’m 59, started fostering when I was 18 and I was single and then we got married and we fostered for some time before we had our birth children and then we stopped. And then when both of our birth children left home which was within a week of each other we started fostering again. No, we had about a year to ourselves thinking oh this is lovely rattling around here, and then after that: right what we are we going to do now, so we thought we’d go back to fostering, so we’ve been back for 8 years. And we’ve looked after about 92 children altogether.

I: 90...92? wow.

P: Yes, some of them have only been on very short respite, emergency but the three children we have at the moment are all long term.

I: Wow. Is that a bit of a shift in terms of, what’s, because obviously emergencies very different to long term.

P: Short term, we’ve had quite a few children for short term, as the thought process has been going on and um some of them have gone back to the family, we’ve had some children for over 2 years, and the little ones when they first came they were 4 and 7, initially it was just for 2 weeks, because the little one was four and although we were approved 0-18 we had a preference for 5 and over, cause to be honest, I like it when children go to school, because then I can have, I’m trying to think of a polite way to put that but there isn’t one, cause during the day I can do all my shopping I can do all of that, everything, so that when they come home I can be the butlers red coat, I don’t have to say oh I’m going to go do they cleaning or I’m doing the ironing, I’m there to supervise them support them, give them what their attention. So when they said he was only four I’m thinking oooh he’s too young! And um, but they said he does go to school, ok then! That’s it, so they brought them straight from their birth family straight to us on the Tuesday evening initially for two weeks and then things just progressed and then they went to court, and by the time all of that went through that was about two years and by then you can imagine you’ve built up a huge attachment and they do to you, and I just found it, obviously we had the conversation do we want to be long term match, and actually morally how could you let these children go when this was their home we were their parents and on the other hand if there had have been other foster carers around who had been around who had been half our age who had been more suitable for example X is black, if there could have been some black heritage carers then I would have sent them away with my love, but actually the truth was the average age of a foster carer is 56 anyway which I was,

I: Gosh is that true I didn’t realise that

P: And I’ve got more energy than loads of 56 year olds I know, I’ve got more energy and enthusiasm then lots of younger foster carers so we thought actually, you know, they’re probably better off staying with us, so plan A turned to plan B and plan B is lovely.

I: As life often does doesn’t it.

P: Life often does, so the plan A was going to be that X who is now 17 and a half, when he reaches 18 that would probably be us done with fostering, but hey ho. Life changes and that’s fine.

I: Ahh lovely, ok, so erm, I think we spoke, I mean we ended up talking about a lot of different children that you had with you, but if you could just pick one of the children that you’ve had with you who’s maybe, maybe who’s behaviours been the more challenging side and just kind of start of by telling me a little bit about them, who they are, what their personality, what they’re like.

P: I can tell you about our middle child. Cause, you don’t put his name or anything in this

I: No

P: So I can say, ok...when he first came he came straight from home he was 7 and a half, he was soiling himself at school every day he wasn’t eating properly he would only eat pot noodles, so no fruit no vegetable, he was under the hospital at XXX for all of his bowels and things because, and he was on medication, because obviously if you don’t eat the right food that was, so he was severely constipated, and if you know so when you’re constipated all the food flows around the outside and then it comes out like squidges because the main poo doesn’t come down so you get all this leakage that just comes out, so completely, just completely, yeah not very good. So, he was suffering with friendships at school because who wants to sit next to the boy who looks really dirty, is really grubby and actually poos himself all the time? Nobody wants to do that, so very low self-esteem, neglected, emotionally abused and we don’t know what else actually. So, when he came he was very very sad. He came wearing a vest for an 18 month year old and a little pair of shorts, that was it. And the advert that you see you know for NSPCC when you see the little boy on the stairs with the big eyes and, he was just like that.

I: What was he like when he first came to you?

P: Just really shut down really quiet, really compliant, but he thought he was in charge of the world. But not in a difficult way to deal with but he in his birth family he was the royal prince, so what he said went so he would be telling us what time he’d be going to be, mmm, actually it doesn’t work like that, or we’d go to the park and he’d be right I’m saying we’re going home now. Mmm no no no you don’t get to say when we go home. We’re in charge, we get to say when we’re going home you get to play. And it was Oh ok, ok. So that was a completely new concept for him, but he did take that on board really really quickly, really quickly, and so that just changed after contact. He’d come back from contact again thinking that. And his behaviour at contact was very different to behaviour at home he’d revert to being in charge, going in mums hand bag taking the things out, just generally doing whatever he wanted, whereas he wouldn’t dream of doing that here.

P: Yeah, what do you think, as you said the being in control, or ruling the house, those kinds of behaviours, where do you think that kind of came from. Obviously, you’ve talked a little bit about the home environment is that him, or just the environment.

P: Oh it wouldn’t be him, he’s 7. It won’t be him, it will be how he’s been encouraged to behave and because erm, his little brother was younger and there was an element of racism in that the little one lived in the corner of the kitchen on the floor and was called the monkey, and just that just he was like the little pet, but this boy this is the white boy this is the this is like the, because they lived with mother and grandparents and so he was the one that, he could do really what he wanted.

I: So did you have, sorry, I’m the one going off piste now, so did you have challenges when they came here in terms of the sibling relationship then.

P: No, because it’s really clear, this is what we need you to do, we believe in positive parenting so if at all possible we were ignoring behaviour, with the little one it was really difficult because he was like an angry little bull, he’d put his head down and he’d do this thing with his foot and he would charge, and so he’d be like this ... and then .... and then charge right at you. So I would just kneel down in front of him, look him straight in the eye and with a real firm voice, No, we do not do that. But ahh we do this, come on let’s do this, and very very quickly within days I would say his behaviour changed, and within days with loads of loads of praise when he was doing anything we wanted him to do, even sitting quietly, that’s lovely, look at you playing with the lego you’re a really clever boy, oh I really like the way that you’re reading your book. Heaps of praise, and if he was doing anything we didn’t want him too, pff (gestures to indicate ignoring), unless he was doing anything that would hurt himself, or his brother, and very quickly they pick up, hmm life’s better when we do this.

I: I get the nice comments, yeah. And so, were there times where the behaviour was particularly challenging at all. Obviously, you’ve talked about the example there of the bull charging type behaviours, but anything that yeah that does stand out even if it was those one offs.

P: Ooh, biting, headbutting, kicking, shouting, running off just completely out of control behaviour,

I: When those sort of behaviours, as you say those out of control ones, what was your thinking behind why that behaviour was happening at the time.

P: The way he’s been parented, that he’s learnt, he’s dong that because you know, all behaviour is communication, he is trying to tell us something, probably he was scared, he’s been picked up you know probably the little one four and a half only ever been at home, picked up, put with strangers, completely new set of rules, the fact that we’ve got a table we eat on, wow that’s really strange. It must be like us being put on mars and a whole different sets of rules, for instance you go to bed in your own bed, because they have no bedtime routine, they both slept in the bed with mum they used to go to bed maybe 1 o’clock 2 o’clock in the morning. So there’s none of that this is how it is, this is your bedroom, this is your bedroom, and actually on top of all of that behaviour he, and still is, really hypervigilant, so you’ve only, I never ever ever shout, never need to shout. I do have a firm voice because sometimes people need to be told, but you only need to use on a scale of 1-10 firm voice, I never get passed two, and even if I’m on a 1, X the little one will freeze and freeze, and then he’ll do this. Even if it’s like nothing serious, but let’s just say he was jumping on the sofa and I went to say “can you stop...”, real hypervigilant X does the same. You just get the big frozen, he’s like a rabbit caught in headlights just completely frozen.

I: Does that kind of that, your knowledge and awareness of the hypervigilance does that change how you manage their behaviour or how you act around them?

P: No, because I think what we’re doing is right it works. Erm sometimes, you have to use a firm voice, that is just, that’s how it is. If you’re out and about and they’re doing something dangerous sometimes you have to you know be saying no we’re not doing that, that isn’t what we do. You know, I don’t want you to hit him, what I want you to do is da da da da da da....they are lovely. They’re all lovely lovely lovely boys, they’re lovely boys. It was erm, behaviour with X definitely changes after contact, so on occasions he’ll come back and he’ll poo himself poo in his bedroom, hide his poo, that’s after contact with grandad...

I: Is that the only person they have contact with then?

P: No grandad and mum. So that’s telling us something, but that contact has now stopped...After four years

I: And again, I’m potentially asking you to rehash answers you’ve already given me whats your understanding of him coming home and then doing that pooing, and hiding it after

P: He spoke, because of the relationship with grandad, and I don’t think we’ll every properly get to the bottom of what that actually was, but I was in the police for 20 years and I was I dealt with a lot of children who had been abused in all sorts of ways and I think he’s giving us a pretty clear signal of what actually might have happened, although he wouldn’t, I don’t think he’d ever be able to say that because he’d be very protective about grandad, and so I think there’s some unusual relationship that’s gone on between them and he’s really scared of grandad.

I: How do you manage, or how did you manage that, in those times when you just realised what had had happened, that he had pooed. What do you do in those situations?

P: Never be cross, just say to him, we really understand that he’s got some really big feelings going on about that, and that’s his body trying to tell us because he can’t use his words to tell us what’s gone on so his body is telling us and it would be lovely if he could use his words or he could write it down that would be great, but if he can’t that’s ok because his body’s doing the job, but as he gets older he might be able to do that, and we just clear it up and it’s no big deal.

I: And do you think that’s the way, the way you’ve managed that is impacted by your understanding of the situation or...

P: Oh yeah, because if we weren’t as aware, I mean we have been foster carers for quite a long time I’ve got a training company I delivery training to foster carers, so I like to think I know my stuff, I do lots of research I try and keep, just like going to that conference, I like to try and keep on top of what’s going on, and I think some foster carers might punish the child, they might think, what are you doing, you know you shouldn’t be pooing, you should be pooing in the toilet, you know I don’t want you doing that again, and of course that wouldn’t be helpful because he’s not doing it to be naughty he’s doing it because you know he’s trying to you know understand some emotions that are going on, or to try and tell us about it.

I: Yeah absolutely, ok. Have there been...Obviously, that’s one example, not necessarily as challenging behaviour but something that happens and has been par for the course but have there been other times where there’s been, can you think of a particular example of a challenging behaviour?

P: Oh yeah he sometimes you don’t get any erm, from the trigger to the firework there’s no build up, so you can be sitting doing homework for instance, doesn’t want to do homework, unfortunately because of all the environmental reasons he was very behind he’s erm, he’s had a cognitive assessment and everything is bang where it should be but he really is struggling at school catching up. So, he does have homework, and he doesn’t like doing homework and so he’ll go from, not making... The one at the moment is Maths, show your workings out, doesn’t want to show his workings out so he can go from, 0 to 100 and he’ll explode and he’ll pull his eyelashes out, he’ll hurt himself he’ll do big scratches down his leg, but won’t speak, so he’ll be completely shut down and then go in his bedroom. And we’ll say you know go in your bedroom take some time, and he’ll throw things or he’ll break things which is funny because if you sat and met him nobody would believe that, nobody would believe that they would say oh he’s really sweet. And he is, but he’s got this, he’s got an inner rage, they’ve both got an inner rage.

I: Where do you think that inner rage comes from, what do you think, is that kind of them? I was talking a little bit with P1 about nature nurture, is that them or their environment, or a mixture, what do you think is driving that?

P: I think that rage is the way that they’ve ben parented, it’s the way that they’ve been parented they’ve learnt that what’s gone on and the older certainly X gets the older he’s got on the more he’s realised that what’s happened to him isn’t right. So, for example, he doesn’t know who his dad is, and initially he was saying well you can’t blame my mum, he was told 7 different versions of who his dad might be, not who he might be, who his dad was. And now that’s changed again, and he’s saying oh well you can’t blame my mum because she’s probably never even met my dad so she might have thought it was him and she might have thought it was him but it’s not her fault, and then you have sex education, Ah, she must have met my dad mustn’t she, yeah she must have done, so, why has she told me all these different things? I don’t know whys she’s done that. So there’s all of that, so we’re waiting to have some in-depth life story work, which will hopefully help him make sense. But do you know what if I was 7 or 4 and I’d been ripped away from what I think’s normal and plonked somewhere with a completely different set of rules, completely different environment, completely different everything, I might show a bit of challenging behaviour as well, I might be a bit cross.

I: Yeah, yeah absolutely, and I think you’re right there’s an element of, an understanding, and an acceptability to a certain extent that you would expect a certain amount of push back or challenge because as you said the change is quite so drastic.

P: What’s really interesting is I went on a course the other day from a woman called XXXX who wrote a book called bubble wrap children and she adopted two girls when they were very young and then when the oldest one went to university and then the second child went to university , she would have been about 18 or 19, the birth family got in touch and said everything you’ve been told is a lie and actually you were stolen from us, you were du du du du, come and be part of our family now and ignore you adoptive family, and they have. And they’ve not been back in touch with her, so her story was, that when we’re doing life story work what children and if you looked at the children's life story book it was “mummy wasn’t able, mummy wasn’t, the house was a bit untidy la la ala la la.... and what she’s saying is you have to be brutally honest you have to say, it’s not mummy wasn’t well, mummy took drugs and she was not able to feed you properly, so when they’re little it’s a four piece jigsaw, then by the time they’re ten you turn that into a 12 piece jigsaw and by the time their 16. And so to start with, uncle billy wasn’t very kind to you, uncle billy used to touch you in places that are private, uncle billy raped you. So, when uncle billy gets in touch via social media as will happen, and that’s going to be our big challenge, you already know up here, yeah it wasn’t just, you weren’t very nice to me, actually this is what you did, and we, so social workers are now taking photographs in some places of when children are removed. This is what your house looked like. So when we say its untidy, mummy’s house was untidy, my house is sometimes untidy, so we don’t want them thinking if the house is untidy are we going to move, no no no no, we are talking like, one of the girls that we looked after, 9 dead rats in the living room, rubbish that was up to the knees. Literally wadding through dirty nappies that’s what we’re talking about, and photographs to say that’s what we’re talking about, because I think the big challenge for foster carers and social services, no one really prepares the children for going back to their birth family, we all think, contact is only 3 times a year for you because that’s good for you and then all of a sudden you’re 18 and you can go and move in if you like, so there’s no, I don’t know if reparation, but there’s no repairing going on, there’s no, all of a sudden, we prepare them for independence we prepare them for cooking and their laundry but we don’t prepare them to have a relationship with their birth family which they probably will with social media, so I think I think we need to because with facebook and stuff like that everybody’s going to be found.

I: Yeah, its much harder to get away from, it’s not a case of oh well if there wasn’t a letter sent to the agency then you’ll never find out anymore...

P: And maybe its ok as an adult to go back and talk to your birth family...I’m on a care leavers website and for lots of the care leavers it’s not. They go back they want to make it alright they want to think that their mum was Cinderella and she was all this, but actually the truth is their mum hasn’t changed in fact things might have got worse, but there doesn’t seem to be a lot of support. I don’t know why I’ve gone off on that tangent, but I think it does need to be done.

I: Yeah, absolutely, ok. I’ll just wrap up with one final question if that’s alright. Which is just to ask you to talk about one particular either a particular memory or event, or a particular facet of life of being a foster carer with the looked after children that is particularly happy or joyful for you.

P: Do you know about NCS, national citizens service?

I: No,

P: All young people can go on it when they’re 16, 17, it’s a project usually in the summer holidays and our lovely X who was 16 wanted to go on this project, so I put his name down and then he didn’t have a place and you think oh well maybe next year, put his name down again, got a place, lovely. When it came to filing in all the paperwork and they realised that he had additional needs, all of a sudden his place disappeared and he didn’t have a place. So I got on the phone with the three children here, da da da da thank you very much can you escalate me to your manager, da da da da escalate me to your manager da da da da, no I want to go up, and in the end I was saying this is not fair, you are, you know you are discriminating against him, all you need to find is a support worker if you can’t find a support worker, I will find a support worker for you, and If I can’t I will come myself but he is going on that course, you’ve told him he’s going, he is going that’s it. So, between us we need to sort this out, and they agreed in the end. So at the end of the conversation which was a long conversation I put the phone down and all three children were clapping and cheering, you did it you are our champion you told them, you made them do the right thing for X, yes. And as a foster carer that’s what we do, we have to be above champion we have to be the people who are absolutely advocating, and we have to do that even more than we would for our birth children because our birth children you sort of expect that you know they’ll do what they’re supposed to do, which they do, because that’s what they’ve been brought up, but these children may not have the same ability or the same sense of worth of themselves of self-esteem, so we have to be doubly triply championing and being their advocates, so we’re like that. And holidays we’ve had some fantastic holidays, two weeks holiday in Tenerife just last year was funny, we’ve been to Disneyland Paris. Yeah great, I love being a foster carer, I’ve done all sorts, I’ve worked in prison, I’ve been in the police, I’ve been a tap dancing instructor, I’ve been all sorts, but being a foster carer is the very very very best thing. I love it, and I love my children.

I: I can see why, well thank you very much

P: You’re very welcome.