Participant: P4

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

Date: 15.01.2019, 12pm

Length: 30:49

Location: Participant’s House

Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant 4 (P)

Age: 47

Sex: Female

Foster Carer Years: 5 and a half years

I: The first thing that I do like to ask, just to get those demographic questions out of the way, so if its ok for you to let me know your age and how long you’ve been a foster carer for.

P: Ok I am 47, I’m single, divorced, for 9 years, and I’ve been fostering for five and half years, and I’ve got two of my own birth children.

I: Ok great, how old are they, just out of interest?

P: erm, 17 and nearly 21.

I: oh ok, oh lovely. Ok, so I presume, so well, the idea of the conversation is to be focused around challenging behaviours, ultimately is where we’re getting to. So, I don’t know if there’s a particular looked after child that you've had that you had in mind, there usually is...

P: Yeah, I’ve had a few sets, would it be helpful if I just thought about one of them?

I: I think generally, if we start of thinking about one, keeping one in mind and then of course as conversations go, we go off on tangents, and obviously feel free to bring in thoughts and comments of other children, but if we can pick one to focus on primarily, yeah so I don’t know if there is then one who comes to mind?

P: There is

I: Great, primary school age presumably as well?

P: Yes, she was 10

I: Ok, great. Erm, so first question, just really broadly, how would you describe that child?

P: Bubbly, loving, fun, energetic, erm, fiery, and negatively, violent when she had a meltdown or something triggered her, then it became seriously violent and dangerous for anybody around her.

I: ok, can you tell me a little bit about her interests, what things she liked to do, that sort of thing.

P: She loved being outdoors, she loved going on the trampoline, going to the park, cycling, she wasn’t that keen on kind of arts and crafts and other stereotypically girly stuff, she did like Lego, but she didn’t have a huge amount of focus, she was much better to be out and about doing stuff.

I: Yeah, oh ok, fair enough. Erm, and could you just tell me a little bit about her behaviour

P: Negative?

I: Positive, or negative, or just...

P: When she was lovely, she was lovely, very bubbly, very engaging, erm, great fun to be around, yeah, she was, when she was lovely, she was really lovely. And then she would flip, often without an obvious trigger and we’d be like, “oh my goodness, where’s this come from?” and then you’d get flying objects, you’d get, I would get kicked, scratched, slapped, bitten, spat at, strangled, erm...threatened with knives, threatened with being pushed down the, well she did try and push me down the stairs several times. and it would last for hours, I’ve had other children where it would last for half an hour/ an hour, but this one would be, anything from kind of four o’clock in the afternoon until ten/eleven o’clock at night...

I: At that level of...?

P: at that level of intensity, and short of sitting on her – which obviously I didn’t do – erm, there wasn’t a lot I could do, and she would go out at 10 o’clock at night on her bike, without lights, without a helmet, in her pyjamas, and she’d just let herself out the front door and cycle around the village. And I’d be out there in my pyjamas kind of just, there was no way I could catch up with her I just had to know where she was, and I’d have people coming out of their houses saying “Is everything alright?” she’d be shouting “somebody save me I’m in danger”. We’ve had a few like that actually, it’s quite interesting. And then people come out and go is everything alright, and I’ll go “I’m a foster carer” and they go “Oh yeah of course you are”, ok, and then go back in their house. So and then, she’d calm down enough to come indoors or to sit on my lap, and she’d kind of revert to being a toddler, and she would like to be rocked and again most of my tricky ones have enjoyed regression, and then being held and rocked, and then she’d just start attacking me again, and then she’d laugh, she’d hackle, it was, I don’t like using the word evil, but I can’t think of another one, but laugh, that is...and she’d go “ha ha I’m hurting you, I just want to hurt you”. And there was one time, boxing day, she was crying and she was saying “I’m just so tired” – this was after a five hour violent episode – and she was crying “I’m just so tired, but I just want to hurt you”, and then she’d slap me or scratch me or punch me and then she’d kind of go to sleep, and then she’d get back up again and hit me again, and it, bizarre, bizarre. Poor little sausage. So yeah.

I: So, when those things are happening, what’s going through your mind?

P: Erm, thankfully with her, I’d experienced a previous child at that, not quite at that level, because she would calm down, and I had a little boy that was similar, but he would not be for hours, but I think the main thing was obviously trying to keep my own daughter safe. My own daughter safe from seeing her mum being beaten up, because obviously she didn’t like that, and my son, he’s away at uni, but when he came back he’d be really concerned, but when it was just me and the little girl, in a way, I felt it was part of her therapy, so yes I was hurting physically, but emotionally, at the time of the crisis, emotionally I was ok, it was after the event when she’d gone to sleep that I’d be like “oh, my goodness did that really happen” and I’d look at the time and go “woah, that was a long one” and I’d have to phone emergency duty team and speak to the.., with this type of child, in [LOCAL AUTHORITY] you have a special team, and I was a part of that special team, for kind of specialist foster carers, and you have the telephone numbers for managers not just emergency social workers. So, I’d be on the phone to a manager, and y'know, it was handy, because I could say, she’s shouting that I’m hurting her but I’m not, do you understand that if somebody reports me...

I: Yeah, protecting yourself

P: Yeah exactly, but they couldn’t do a lot, y’know, somebody said “what can we do to help”, well, there’s not a lot love y’know, I’m here and I’m dealing with it and yeah

I: Gosh that must have been hard.

P: It was, it was, yeah it was full on, that was, um, bless her. But we still, we keep in touch and we love her and, Christmas this year will be different, because it will be calmer...

I: Yeah, has she moved on recently then?

P: She moved, she moved on New Year’s Eve

I: Oh ok...

P: Yeah beginning of this year, but I still remember it like it was last week.

I: Yeah, I’m not surprised, yeah. Ok. I mean, those sorts of behaviours, like what’s your understanding of where that’s coming from?

P: erm, often, they don’t really know, sometimes with other children I’ve seen triggers and with this one I would see, I would go “ah, that’s because, erm, I don’t know, maybe I mentioned a place or a town or an activity that in the past would have caused her stress. Or, I was taking some kind of control away, so I was saying in 5 minutes we’re going to be doing this, erm, and she didn’t like anybody else being in control. So I kind of assumed – which is why I felt it was part of her therapy – that it was all past trauma, and it was her way of dealing maybe at the time of trauma she couldn’t react, and now that she’s in a safe place she can.

I: Ahh I see ok, so almost that being able to, when she's experienced traumatic events in the past but hasn’t had the opportunity to process her own emotional response to that that actually that’s what was coming out now when she was feeling in a safer place.

P: Yeah, exactly.

I: Ok, yeah. And, how does that understanding shape, or does that understanding shape how you then responded to it?

P: Totally, totally. And I think that’s where my family, that saw her on boxing day, that was, that was the worst, because we were amongst my family as well, and she stood up to my dad who is a big strong man, erm, and y'know he said, “you’ve got to stop this [participant]” to me, “y’know you just can’t allow this to happen, she can’t behave like this”, but my understanding is that because of her past trauma, this isn’t a choice to be naughty, this is her way of processing and reacting to past trauma, and its coming out and yes its horrible, but its helping her to move on and to process. So, I think it’s helped me gain and understanding and therefore I don’t get... I was prepared for her, I knew what she was before she came to me, because the last carers weren’t coping, so I knew what I was taking on and I agreed to it. So in the past when I’ve had my first really tricky one, we, nobody knew what she was like, and it was only once she had arrived and settled and felt safe, that's when things started happening, and that was harder to deal with because we’d had a nice kind of calm introduction to it and then suddenly – and you didn’t expect it. Whereas this one, I knew, and that’s helped, that helped me in dealing with her and parenting her in a totally different way in a therapeutic way rather than just a normal kind of parenting way. Yeah, I think, did that answer your question?

I: Yeah, yeah

P: I could talk about her for hours.

I: Yeah, Yeah, I think, so we’ve talked little bit about I guess, the more kind of explosive level behaviours were there kind of, I don’t know was that the only type of challenging behaviour that you saw, was there kind of low-level stuff that was going on as well or does that just kind of...

P: for this one in particular, we had some really lovely moments. So it was, it was intense either way, so she didn’t, there wasn’t much concerning, I mean, she poked my sisters baby when she hadn’t flipped, so when she was in her mellow happy place, she was a little bit violent towards a baby, but I think that was more of a testing to see...so yeah, no her behaviour when she was, when the switch hadn’t gone, her behaviour was lovely, and lots of people commented on how lovely and sweet she is, and then suddenly, there was no warning it just, you just ended up, I didn’t wear a scarf for a few years actually when I had tricky children because they end up trying to strangle you, and if you’re passing them on the stairs they might try and push you down the stairs, you know its, these poor kids.

I: Yeah, what’s your, so you talked a little bit about the trigger, or that there’s something flips, you talked about like a switch or like a flip you used that kind of language. what’s your understanding of where that, was there ever an identifiable cause or trigger, or what’s your understanding of why that would flip and switch so drastically?

P: For her, I think it was probably the majority of it for her would be transitions, so with transitioning from playing on the trampoline to having dinner, or having dinner to bed, or yeah, a change in, even if it was a change but in a planned routine. So it’s now four o’clock so this is what we’re now going to do, and we had a timetable and you know she needed the visual kind of timetable of what we’re going to do and when we’re going to do it and it was often at those transitions and I think for her, evenings and bedtimes where probably her trickiest time. Both in our house, but I think from her past, she was one of many children, and I think it was just chaotic, and she didn’t have any structure, and so I think that’s probably why she got to four o’clock in the afternoon and was like “ok, chaos” but actually, she had me and my daughter, there was no need for chaos or uncertainty, but she didn’t know how to trust that, y’know, she’s ten, she’s had 9 years of chaos why should she suddenly change just because the environments changed. Other children I’ve known you can see actual triggers, so that, sexualised behaviour will appear when tis bath time or when there’s a man in the house, or there’s more obvious stuff, whereas this one was more, I suppose the kind of chaos that normally happened from kind of four o’clock onwards.

I: Ok, and was that something that like, how often would you have these?

P: everyday

I: oh everyday?

P: Oh yeah, yeah yeah yeah, guaranteed. I mean, sometimes she’d have a half an hour, an hour flip at some point in the day, if something was transitioning from one activity to another but she’d often be able to pull it back, but no the evenings from mid-afternoon onwards were... yeah... she did a lot of self-harm on herself and threatening self-harm, so she got, oh she got plastic carrier bags and put them over her head and tried suffocating and strangling and “you’re just going to sit there and you’re gonna watch me dieeeee”.

I: That must have been hard?

P: Yeah, it was, yeah. But I knew, that if I tried taking the bags off her it would just get worse, so I needed to wait, and when I pretended to read, I had a book and I just had it in my hand was pretending to ignore her, she was at my feet, so it wasn’t like we were in a different room, erm, and she was just there on the rug and I just thought well if it gets to a point where she’s gonna get ill, then I can intervene, but she’s just doing this because she wants a fight, and I’m not going to fight her. So, in the end, she did stop, and then she put it around my neck and tried strangling me instead.

I: So, yeah, that’s hard.

P: Yeah, yeah.

I: And how, what, you talked a little bit about not wanting kind of to give the fight, what’s you understanding of why she was doing that kind of - I guess if we talk about that specific behaviour

P: The strangling?

I: Yeah

P: No idea, I don’t think she was trying to actually hurt herself, erm, it was, I think, more of a shock tactic, which is why I don’t think it got worse, that particular time, because I didn’t react, so I kind of didn’t feed the fire, that’s how we describe it in this house, I didn’t feed the fire, erm, because she wanted a reaction she wanted that...and again, it’s horrible but I imagine it’s what she was used to. So, I normally fight with the adults in my life, so that’s what I need to do and anything I can do to make her fight me is what I’ll do.

I: Yeah, so as in, because she’s experienced that in the past, almost trying to recreate that environment then?

P: Yes, yeah exactly.

I: Ok, yeah. You talked a little bit about, or you began to mention some of the other children that you’ve worked with and how there’s been some more identifiable triggers, is there another child that comes to mind that you could kind of talk a little bit about?

P: Yeah?

I: Yeah, could you just tell me a little bit about them and their behaviours?

P: erm, oh hang on, which one...erm...yeah, probably, I’ve had some recently just in the last 6 months, but... no I’ll go back a couple of years because I think that’s probably a bit more obvious triggers. So, she came aged 6 with her younger sister. And they had come from chaos, and they’d come from really bad neglect and abuse, but we didn’t know about the abuse until a few weeks in. and then it came out over the next two years and it’s still coming out now, but I knew because within a few days of them arriving, that there had been some kind of sexual abuse as well as the neglect and the violence and...so her triggers, the little one was too little, but she would go, she was quite happy in her cot and just hiding, so when big sister aged six started kicking off, she would just want to go in her own space, and we imagine that’s what she did at home, was to hide, because it’s safer. Erm, but the bigger one the six-year-old, she would have triggers. Erm, and I’d end up with dinner on my head, and we’re sat at the table and we were just eating and then one of her triggers... I can’t even think what it was... I upset her for some reason, I might have said, is it nice spaghetti bolognaise or something? And then it landed on my head. And I think a lot of her triggers were, I don’t know how to cope with this situation so I’m just going to kind of go to my default, but also if she felt that she might be in a vulnerable position or she might be about to be abused in some way, which is why I said about bath time. Y’know you haven’t got your clothes on therefore something bad’s gonna happen. There’s a man coming in your house, something bad's gonna happen. So, then she would, she’d go one or the other way, one way would be very sexualised behaviour and flirting with the man and sitting on his lap, and the other way would be angry and shouting and fighting and throwing things, so it’s kind of...

I: different responses...and how would you manage that sort of situation then?

P: She did a lot of regression, so I would hold her, because she was smaller, I didn’t restrain her, I had to restrain the ten year old which officially we’re not allowed to do, but I needed to do it to keep people safe, and they all knew about that, but this one would allow me to put her on my lap and hold her, and she’d want a bottle of water and pretend she was a baby. So that’s mostly how I dealt with her, but, she was my first tricky foster child, and for the first few days I would give her time out and I’d say well if you don’t have the time out I’m going to add another minute, and then on the second day, my daughter went, “mum you can’t give her 20 minutes time out she can’t sit still for 30 seconds”. And that’s when I realised, I needed to change my parenting style according to what their needs are. And time out for most of these children just doesn’t work, they need time in, they need the attention the love the being held the unconditional love without harming them.

I: And, just going back to what you said about the regressive behaviours, the kind of wanting to be rocked, and that side of things. What’s your understanding of where that kind of behaviour has come from?

P: Most of the time, I imagine it’s because they haven’t experienced those things and they need to go back and experience it to be able to then move on to the next stage. And it’s also a way of me showing that I’m kind and that I can love and that I can provide, and so you need comfort? I can provide that comfort. Whether it’s in the form of a dummy for a six-year-old or a bottle for a ten-year-old, it doesn’t matter, if that’s your need, we’ll meet it because – I could get emotional – because that’s what you need. And we had one that just needed a dummy, so aged 7 she got a dummy, and she’d never had one, but she just needed that to be able to go back, and I don’t know if its building the pathways in her brain, or, but they need, we all need to go through these stages and if they’ve missed out, or if there’s been damage done they need to go back and start again, and that’s where a lot of friends and family who have tried to support me, they just don’t get that kind of regressive behaviour, they just don’t understand.

I: What do you think their view of it is?

P: “Oh what they’re 7, why do they need a dummy that’s ridiculous” kind of, maybe not quite as harsh as that, but that’s the...

I: the sentiment?

P: Yeah, and out and about with y’know a 6 year old telling me to F-off – I was in a shopping queue with the six year old that I was just talking about before, and she told me to F-off and walked out the shop, with shopping in her hand. And I just stood there and I said, she’ll come back, and people were giving me awful looks like “what an awful parent!”. But actually, if I had responded – the first time she told me to F-off I told her off, and she said “I know the C-word” and she tried saying all these swear words, and we don’t have any swearing in this house, we’re Christians and we don’t, y’know we’re quite, I like to think, the house is quite calm, and so when she first started kicking off and swearing, ooh my goodness, but now, if children do it, I just, it doesn’t affect me now, apart from they’re showing me they’ve got a need – how can I meet the need.

I: What do you think in that scenario in the supermarket when she was kind of swearing at you, what do you think was going on there for her?

P: I imagine, she gets, she gets triggered when she’s out in public, because she never knows who these people are and what they might do. She doesn’t feel safe around people, she is testing, so she’ll be testing me to see if I’ll still be the one of those adults in the whole shop that will be there for her unconditionally. So, there’s loads of things going on.

I: Yeah. And you talked about your, the kinda decision to just stand and let her go, what was you’re thinking about, I guess, responding in that way?

P: If I’d have gone after her she’d of run, [knock at the door] but she knew – oh sorry I’ll just get the door – but she knew that I was still going to wait for her, so I think that’s probably what that is.

[participant answers the door] Interview ends...