Participant: F5

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

Date: 25.11.2019

Length: 64 minutes

Location: Foster Carer’s School

Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant F5 (P)

Age: 52

Sex: Female

Foster Carer Years: 5.5 years

(Teacher years): 29

I: Ok, perfect, so really, it’s just an informal conversation, I have some questions to perhaps guide the conversation a little bit, but it is relatively broad. If I could get you to start off with just some demographic details to begin with so age and role and experience with looked after child, so I guess in your perspective it might be from both as a foster carer and a teacher.

P: So, my age?

I: Yes

P: So, um, I’m 52, and I’m headteacher of X and I’ve been headteacher here for 20 years. And before that worked in, always worked in city schools in X and I’ve been teaching since 1990. In terms of being a foster carer, we were approved to foster about 5 and a half years ago and I’ve had a range of placements, but our long-term placement has been with us for nearly five years.

I: Oh ok, so have you had other placements alongside that then?

P: yeah, so we’ve had other placements before he came, and he came with his brother, and had his brother with him for two years, and then they split the boys. And we’ve had other placements, respite, unaccompanied asylum seekers, and short-term, alongside him, but he’s our only long-term placement.

I: ok, is he then one that we’re talking about today?

P: so, we’ll focus on him mainly.

I: yeah, ok, well why don’t you start then if that’s alright with just describing him to me?

P: ok, so he’s currently 11 years old. Was initially taken into care when he was 20 months old and spent a year with foster carers, then he went to live with great aunt on a special guardianship order and lived with her for four years until that placement broke down. And then he came with his brother to live with us, and then, him and his brother came obviously as a pair, we were told that one of them had special needs and the other one didn’t, and what that actually really meant, was one of them had an educational health care plan and the other one was in the process of getting an education health care plan. So, they both have special needs, erm, and his brother’s two years older than him. And then, both boys have got reactive attachment disorders and chronic trauma disorders diagnosed by CAMHS, and we also worked with CAMHS and the social worker cause our one was making allegations about his brother abusing him, which is why they then did the sibling assessment and agreed to split the boys. And at the time when they did the sibling assessment, the one that we’ve still got had formed a very close attachment to me, and his brother didn’t have an attachment to anybody, and they said these boys have got to be split and therefore, the older one hasn’t got an attachment, so it doesn’t actually, in a sense it doesn’t really matter to him where he goes. The younger one has got an attachment it would now be cruel to separate him from you when he’s got an attachment. Even though the older brother actually fitted in with the age range that we really wanted. So, we’ve had the little man for five years. He has been through six different educational establishments in that time and that hasn’t been our choice, but he was in year 2 in an infant school, so he had to change for year 3, and the junior school attached to his infant school was requires improvement and so he wasn’t allowed to go there, and his cousin who he lived with was at the junior school, so you’ve got a broken down relationship, not really good for him to see them every day, so he moved to a local primary school. They really struggled to meet his needs, so they sent him to a unit, where he was doing really well, and then suddenly we got a phone call to say he’d been accepted in a special school, even though we didn’t know special school was on the horizon, and at a week’s notice he had to change to a special school. He then hated the special school, so it took us 10 months to try and get him out of the special school back to mainstream, and he did year 5 and year 6 in a mainstream school, and he’s just moved to year 7 so he’s had to change schools again.

I: Oh my goodness, gosh.

P: So, lots of change for him. He’s also just been diagnosed with ADHD, and he’s just been diagnosed with visual stress, so he has to wear coloured glasses to be able to read.

I: Gosh, so lots going on there.

P: Yes, lots going on for him.

I: Yeah, wow, ok. And what’s he like, generally, what’s his personality, what are his likes/ dislikes?

P: he is a very active young man and he loves sport, loves all sport so he currently plays for a local football club and for a local cricket club, he loves being outside he loves trampolining, he likes gardening, he’s extremely sociable, even though he struggles to make relationship and maintain relationships. He loves being around people, he really is very good with younger children. He does love reading, even though it’s been a struggle until he could actually see the things properly, he loves cuddly toys. He, I mean at home, he’s just an absolute dream, an absolute delight, he’s so polite, he’s so respectful. But, y’know he’s really kind really considerate, he’s extremely generous. So he can’t have money, because it just burns a hole in his pocket, but when he gets his pocket money, if he saw somebody in need they could have anything he had, y’know and if he’s got, y’know, if we’re out he’ll say “oh I’ll buy that for you” well no you don’t have to you don’t have much money “no no I’ll do that”, if he, y'know he doesn’t eat many sweets, because he’s extremely sensitive to sugar so we’ve taken sugar out of his diet but if he did have a packet of sweets he would give away most of them, he'd give away his last sweet, y’know he’d give away anything to anybody, incredibly generous spirit. So that’s the child we see at home

I: yes, I’m sensing there might be a different child presentation somewhere else.

P: The child they see at school and in other places can be very very different. He is a very very anxious child. And he, his anxieties display themselves in a very aggressive way. So, transition to secondary school has been really problematic and we’ve had to work with the secondary school to say you’ve got a child who is being aggressive to people and is running away and out of the classroom and running out of school and slamming doors, and throwing things at people, because he doesn’t feel safe and we need to make him feel safe and you need to build a trusting relationship with him, and then you’ll see the child that we see. He’s, he’s really quite perceptive as well and he’s now able to verbalise a lot of things that are going on for him in a way that he couldn’t before. So, he’d come home, and he’d say mum they don’t understand me they don’t understand that they’re trying to get too many people working with me. And when we unpicked what was going on for him at school, two-week timetable he has 17 different teachers. And because he’s got an Education Health Care Plan with 1:1 support, they were giving him 12 different people to do the 1:1 support over the two week period, so that’s 29 adults he had to get to know, then there’s the head of house, the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the SENCo, so he was right there were too many people and he couldn’t cope. So we had a meeting at school with the educational psychologist, and I think school, the meeting was set up to make a tight plan around how they were going to cope with his needs, but by the time the meeting came, I think the SENCo had spoken to the EP and was saying actually we want to find a way to manage him out of school, but by the end of the meeting it was: how are school going to meet his needs in school and in a mainstream school. He know does have a safe space in the school, the safe space they gave him he thought was an exclusion room and he thought he went there when he was naughty so we’ve taken teddy in, we’ve taken a blanket in, we’ve taken a calming down box with fiddly things from home so he’s got things so he feels it’s his space so now it is a safe space so he’s now happy to go to that safe space when he’s not in class. They’ve moderated his timetable, and although they wanted to put him on a part-time timetable, social worker resisted it fortunately, so he’s in school full-time but he only goes to two lessons a day. And he chooses which lessons he goes to. At the moment, he has set his room up, his safe space is currently a Christmas card making factory, so he keeps taking paper in from home he’s manically folding paper and making cards I think he’s trying to make a card for every member of staff in the school. So, he’s extremely resourceful, extremely productive, he will survive in life, because he’s got the personality, he’s got the characteristics and he’s quite an entrepreneur, so he will thrive. But yes, so we see, we see something different to him then he does at home. I say sporty he plays football. This time last year he was really struggling in his football club and swearing and shouting are triggers for him and they trigger memories of being with mum and dad, and he was 20 months old when he was taken away. And they triggering all sorts of memories, so this time last year he was having all sorts of memories, lots of flashbacks, and unfortunately one of the triggers was his football coach, and so we had an end of November, a big blow up in the middle of the football match and I just took him out the situation, coach was screaming and shouting at him which set off a massive memory, when I then, it took me 15 minutes to get him calm enough to get him to the car, and then he just broke down in tears “they don’t understand me” and I said right we’re not going back to that football club. And you see what I’ve always done with him is if you start something, you carry on through, so you don’t give up midway through the season, so if you’re committed to something you carry on with your commitments is what we’ve been teaching him. But actually, I then said to him, this is affecting your health and I'm not prepared to put you in that situation and took it away from him so he wasn’t having to say that “I’m not going to play for them” I’m giving up. It was actually, no, we’ve made the decision, you’re not there you’re not well enough and then actually I don’t want to put you back in that position so you're not going to go back to that club. And he’d been saying I don’t ever want to play football again. So, we said that’s fine, and then in January, he said to me, mummy I want to play football again. I said ok, I said shall I look for a new club for you, he said yes please. So we then researched and found a new club and we’ve chosen a club which play on a Saturday instead of a Sunday cause the Saturday leagues locally are less competitive than the Sunday leagues. and he turned up at a new club, end of February and they said, our teams full he’ll only be able to train with us. And I said that’s fine I just want him to be able to train, I don’t expect him to come into the team that’s absolutely fine, I said he’s a really fast player he knows what he’s doing. They went “we’ve got lots of really fast players” I said that’s fine. End of the first training session they came up to me and went, he’s really fast isn’t he “yes”. Can he play on Saturday? But I had also spoken to the coach, id spoken to them about his special needs and about the triggers he has and what you might see displayed in his behaviour and I spoke to them about how if he has an episode, how you need to deal with him. And I said really the best way to deal with him is if he’s not endangering himself or anybody else, leave him. Just give him space, and then he will come back, don’t chase after him because that just makes it worse for him. So, he’s’ been playing with that team since February he has had one or two moments and the first time, he was playing a match and he had a moment in the match and the other boys started laughing at him and thought it was funny. Actually, the coach sat all of the boys down later and spoke to them away from him and said look, this is his special needs, this is how we deal with it and it’s a really lovely group of lads. One of the other boys in the team had a stroke last year so they sort of understand everybody needs to be treated differently, and they’ve been really good with him. He’s just having a wobble at the moment, but this time of year he always has a wobble. This is the time of year he was taken away from mum, this is the time of year he then had a year with his foster carers so this time of year he left his foster carers. It was this time of year he was split up from his brother. It was this time of year he came to join us originally when his placement broke down with his great aunt and uncle. It was this time of year that he was moved to a special school. So, it’s always a difficult time for him. So he didn’t play on Saturday but he did have a cold and it was raining and so I said to him – normally there’d be no excuse and I’d say we’re going – but I said to him, you haven’t been very well have you? And he went no I think I better stay at home and I said yeah wise decision, but his new coach completely gets him and understands which is really good. He’s just he was playing cricket so he loves cricket and he said to me in the summer, I don’t want to play for that cricket club anymore, and I said well that’s ok, in the autumn term we start again with choosing activities so if you don’t want to do cricket you don’t have to do cricket that’s fine. Two weeks ago he suddenly said to me “I want to do cricket” I went ok “oh and I’ve found a club I want to go to, so he’d researched it, and he turned up at the club two weeks ago and walked in and there were some people from his junior school there, some people he knew from scouts and different things, so straight away he felt really really welcomed. So you know he has successes in all sorts of places like that, but he does really struggle with interactions. Yeah, he struggles being away from myself and my husband. But y’know, at the moment with the transition to secondary which he’s found so hard. We’ve in a sense, he’s taken himself back to a period in his life when he had more success. So when he first came and we didn’t give the boys pocket money but we had reward charts which, anything works for him for a while, and he then, from the rewards chart there’d be targets on the chart and they’d earn stickers and then you’d trade your stickers in at the bank at the end of the week to say, right, what are you going to get out of the reward box, for how many things you’ve got. And when we’d go shopping he’d say Oh I want this I want that and so we’d say ok I’ll buy that or we’d say that’s going to cost you 50 stars, that’s going to cost you 20 stars so he could start to see the value of things, so some weeks he’d say well I’ve got 50 stars but I want that prize that’s 100 stars so I’m going to save up for it. We haven’t done that for at least the last, since his brother left to be honest, he hasn’t needed it. And then changing secondary school he suddenly said I want a reward chart. Ok, you can have a reward chart. So, he’s got it, he’s brought back the prize box, he’s started to choose some things and I think actually he’s quite clever. Because now he has pocket money and he has a reward box so he’s doing quite well out of this deal. But y’know if it’s been what he needs to get him over the hurdle, because when he was refusing to go to school earlier this term, then the two weeks leading up to half term the y’know the reward was, well what do you want for your reward, I want to go to London at half-term, ok, you go into school every day we’ll go to London. And the next week it was, right what do you want, and that was just getting into school. But now he’s set himself up with all of these other targets, but actually he did that for two weeks, the reward chart is still on the fridge, but he’s not actually doing it because he’s now comfortable again, but he’s, its sort of like he flits up and down the levels so much. But what he’s now done, is whereas he was really struggling in September/ October, he’s now gone right back up the scale and his empathy levels have gone right up which is really interesting. He has regular, weekly CAMHS sessions 1:1 at the moment, and I was speaking to his play therapist last week and saying that I’d read him a bedtime story and I was really tired, so I was there, and he said oh mummy you’re tired. So, I started to pretend to fall asleep, he put his quilt over me, and then he disappeared, and I thought, where has he gone, what’s he doing, five minutes later he came back up the stairs. Mummy I’ve made you a hot chocolate, so actually, so things, that I would do to soothe him, he was then doing. And then he said to me, he said I’ve decided that I’m not going to leave home now when I’m 18. And I said, "oh ok", I’m going to stay and I’m going to look after you. So, you know he’s now able to show empathy to show those things for people in a way that he couldn’t before, and he calls us mum and dad and he has from the day that he arrived. Erm, and although social care always so, oh we don’t recommend that, the day him and his brother arrived, actually his brother walked up the front path and said, “I’m allowed to call you mum and dad, so I am”, I went ok. It didn’t come from us, it came from the boys, but actually y’know when we were speaking to social workers at the time, we said mum and dad is the person you live with. Everybody has a mum and dad, that’s who you live with, so at the time for the boys that was just it, that’s who you live with. Erm, and although his brother left us 3 years ago, his brother will still call me mum, but he’ll call his great aunt mum as well because great aunt was mum as well. But for out little man its now changed, in his mind we really are mum and dad, he knows he’s long term linked to us, so he knows he’s with us and he’s seen other foster placements come and go and as we’ve had respite and short term ones, and every time somebody’s going I’ll be preparing him like “they’re going, but you know you’re staying”.

I: So, he’s been able to see that he’s the constant

P: But one point he said to me, I know I’m staying I get the message I know that. Ok so actually y’know we are his family and at the moment he doesn’t have any contact with any of his birth family at the moment. Which in a sense is easier for us, but there’s sort of bits to handle on that, but none of his birth family want anything to do with him, they have contact still with his older brother, but they don’t want contact with him, because in the birth family's mind, we don’t fully know everything that went on, but our little man seems to have got the blame for everything all of the time, I think possibly for the children leaving mum and dads care, even though he was 20 months old, and his brother was 3 and 3/4s, he seems be the one who was to blame. The great aunt, they sort of demonised our little man, and brother is ok, but actually, brother is even more damaged than our little man, he’s got two more years damage. But what we realised once the boys were split because actually our little man when he first came his displaying behaviour was a lot more difficult to manage than his brother. But his brother was controlling him, and so right I think on about the second day they were there, little man had a tantrum and his brother would say at this point he throws things, at this point he does this, and was giving him a script the whole time, and we’ve been re-writing the script for him. No, you don’t actually have to do this, there is another way, you can do that. And even with, when they moved to primary school because they both then, when our little man had to move in year three his brother moved as well, so were then in the same school and the school struggled with our little ones behaviour and they said we’ve got to have one of these children going, and they chose for our little man to be the one they sent to special school. And we said you’ve chosen the wrong one. His brother's needs are much more, because you see his brother needs special school, but he doesn’t. the day our little man went to special school, his brother’s behaviour flipped at school and was worse, and they went “we’ve chosen the wrong one haven’t we” - yes you have. Because for his brother, the whole time he had somebody to control, he could manage his behaviour when he was in control of somebody else and he could play the role of I’m the good one and my brothers the bad one, I mean see our little man does lots of polarisation still. So I mean in his mind his brother is, he can’t say a nice word about his brother because his brother is bad and everything about his brother is bad, and y’know and for a while we had it at home - I was ok but everything my husband did was wrong. Because he couldn’t have two people who were ok at the same time, and we’ve been having to work with him and saying well actually, its ok to have more than one person who’s ok, and actually you’re ok person can be not ok at times as well because that’s called relationships, y’know, because so, he’s had to do a lot of learning with that. But watching him yesterday with my 16-year-old birth son, who teases him relentlessly, like a 16-year-old brother would tease an 11-year-old brother. Y’know and they have got a really lovely sibling relationship in a way that he doesn’t actually have with his birth brother, so I find it absolutely fascinating, all of the attachment bits with him and the working out of the trauma and you can see and you can see the re-writing of his scripts for him and giving him a new narrative. And not having to go with the old narrative which is actually I’m worth nothing. But he was still at times he was still replayed the old scripts, and quite often he’d be replaying it. Again at the weekend, even though he was having a good weekend, he was oh I’m worthless, I can’t do anything, oh actually no you’re not. Oh, and I’m ugly, and I’d say no you’re not you’re a really – we were walking yesterday and two girls from his school we walked past and were giving him the eye – I’ve just seen how those two girls were looking at you? I said ooh. And he said oh I don’t know why I’m so ugly. And I said no you’re not you’re a really beautiful boy, your beautiful on the inside your beautiful outside. But y’know.

I: So, I mean can you, you mentioned a little bit about some of the, that maybe there were some more behaviours when he first kind of came to your family, can you talk a little bit about what are the more challenging behaviours that you have seen from him?

P: Ok, so, at his worst, it will be an absolutely full on two-year-old tantrum, screaming, shouting, throwing things, destroying things, and that could be set off by anything and that could last for hours. Completely inconsolable, and what we used to do to work through those, is yes give him space, but then apart from that we worked out that y’know what he’s a child who needs to be doing something to get his emotions out, so we would go for a walk, and we would walk from our house in a straight line until he stopped screaming and stopped the shouting, and then when he’d stopped, we would turn round, and walk back home.

I: Gosh, how far would you get sometimes?

P: over a mile.

I: Wow

P: I think mile and a half was our best, and we’d say nope, you know the rule, we’re going to do, and we’ll go in a straight line and then we’ll do it back. I mean the interesting thing is that over time he’s got much quicker at being able to regulate and calm down and talk about what it is. He’s also when he’s been struggling, he then got to a stage of saying, I need to go out for a walk with you. Ok right lets put our coat on, usually 9 o’clock at night when it’s raining.

I: helpfully

P: helpfully! Y’know often he’d be in his pyjamas or something and it would alright let’s get your wellies on let’s get a coat on let’s go, because that’s what he needed. Now, if he does, if he does a sort of thing like that, he can calm down in two to three minutes, it’s absolutely incredible. So, what we do now, if something happens and he doesn’t like it, he might walk out the room go upstairs, slam the door, so we get more of like a teenager strop. Two minutes later he’ll be back down. And you think actually, from, this is taking hours, to where you are has been an absolutely incredible journey. But, y’know if he was at school so when he was in year 3 at school and he didn’t feel safe and he’d go into one of those it could take them all day to calm him down, he would climb on the banisters, he’d threaten to jump of the bannisters, he’d throw things at people, he’d barricade himself in rooms, he’d slam doors he’d stop people getting out of rooms.

I: What was the understanding, either for the behaviours at home or at school, your understanding of why those behaviours were happening or where they were coming from?

P: Erm, the behaviours at home initially, it was always around if he didn't get his own way, if he didn’t feel safe with something, if his brother had done something to him, usually. At school, it was around, there was a lot more to, y’know when he was at school, we’re then saying to them the whole time he’s at school he doesn’t feel safe. Because at that stage when he moved to that school he’d been with us a year he then had a very close attachment to me and I was saying look, what you’ve got is in a sense a two year old who can’t separate from mummy, but actually he’s doing it in an 8 year old body. Y’know and actually if you had a child at nursery you would treat them in a very different way. And it was trying to get people to understand that although he maybe 7 he may be 8 he may be 9, emotionally at this point in time he’s 2 years old, so your reaction to him needs to be a two-year-old reaction. We did a lot of story telling with him a lot of narrative work, a lot of naming feelings, and talking about things like that so that he could actually then be able to say. When he is anxious he feels it very much in his body, and then you could then sort of say ok, well y’know it’s not that you feel sick, actually this is your feeling anxious, and we’ve had to do a lot of naming feelings for him and actually letting him see that its ok to feel anxious, its ok, to feel angry, its ok, to, these are all ok feelings it’s how we manage those feelings. Erm, y’know at home we tend not to have massive things with him, as I say, because he’s got his own bedroom he’s got his space but also he’s very good now at regulating himself, we’ve got a trampoline in the garden, he needs to have a lot of exercise, so if he’s not coping he’ll quite often just go out and do 10 minutes bouncing. And then come back in, because he knows he needs to do that to regulate himself. Err, we’ve done an awful lot of playdough, hammer beads, got lots of cuddly toys. So we’ve just redone his bedroom and he’s got lots of sensory things in his bedroom, because he’s got, he’s very sensory aware, so he’s got a very soft carpet, he’s got very soft blanket so sometimes he’ll just roll on the floor because that’s what he needs, or he might go in the garden and just do a bit of digging. At the age, two years ago he suddenly said to me, I want to do a vegetable patch, so we said ok, let’s just go and dig a vegetable patch. So, we changed one of the flower beds into a vegetable patch, cause actually he just needed the physical bit of digging, now he’s a bit older he might just go out on his bike and cycle around the block a couple of times, and then come back, but he never goes far. Never goes far, even when he had, the summer before last he had one day he just didn’t like me at all and he was never going to live with me again, and he walks out and I sort of followed him and he went around the block so I followed him twice, and then I tagged with my husband who then followed him twice, because y’know we’re getting quite tired here. He’s still keeping on going, but and on that day he ran out with no shoes on, because he just doesn’t, in that stage he just doesn’t feel it, but actually he’s not great with shoes, quite often, anytime he’s home shoes will be off, socks will be off, he needs to feel that grounding, but um, also when he first came to us, we then went and got his feet measured and his shoes were completely the wrong size, so his shoes probably were uncomfortable, so he’s still got some bits from the past and some bits from neglect. And you said y’know what are the triggers what sets him off, we still don’t necessarily know what all of the triggers are. Swearing is one, dogs is another one, and then, suddenly one day he just froze when he was out for a walk with my husband and they were walking around a pond, and he just suddenly froze, and he went. That dog looks like buster, mummy killed buster, mummy threw buster off the balcony and killed him”. Ok. We then tracked back, and y’know did some checking, at that time we were still having contact with his great aunt. Mummy did throw buster off the balcony and kill buster. Now that happened when he was one, and that memory came out of him when he was 8. Y’know. So, don’t tell me that it doesn’t have an impact on children when they’re young. He’s been able to recently anybody says the word bitch, that is an absolute trigger for him – that’s what dad used to call mum all the time. Yeah? So, there’s that, sometimes smells set him off, but you’re never quite sure what it’s going to be.

I: So how does your – I know you said you don't know all of them of course – but in terms of your knowledge of some of those triggers or some of your understanding of what’s driving those behaviours, how does that impact on then how you manage those behaviours that come out of when there’s then been a trigger?

P: So, if I think y’know there was an incident when he was playing football recently and he was on the ground screaming, and he was hurt. But not hurt in the way to have that reaction. I will go over with him, he will accept touch from me, he won’t accept touch from everybody, so I will touch him, I’ll stroke him and I’ll say “I’m here, it’s safe, you are safe, I’m here, when you’re ready” and just do the soothing with him, stroking him, and saying “its ok, its ok”, and then he will cry on me and then we’ll sit up and then we can go through, but he won’t respond in the same way to my husband. He won’t let my husband touch him at that point, I’m the only one he will let touch to sooth him, but I do say to people he does need to hear the script: Its safe, you are ok. Y’know to ground him back to where he is, sometimes distraction will work with him, sometimes it won’t, so it might be, I might use some grounding techniques, I might say to him “right, what are five things that we can hear, what are four things we can see, what are three things we can smell”, so take it back to his senses to then get back, so that he can then say “ok right, lets carry on with where we are and with what it is. But I think because over the last two years I’ve done a lot of work with him on self-soothing techniques, we’ve worked through it with CAMHS, he was on the anxiety pathway. And we had workbooks to go through on the anxiety pathway, and we did some of those things and we laughed at some of those things together. And I was in a parents support group and I was saying, the thing is, I’m listening to everything you’re saying yeah he’s got anxiety, you’re children have got anxiety, but his anxiety comes from his traumas, and actually it’s not the same, and although some of the techniques I can use, it’s not the same. And so they then put him on the trauma pathway, and I said that’s fine but I don’t want him to go to the bottom of the waiting list for the trauma pathway, because it took us four years of fighting to get him 1:1 CAMHS support. When he then got the 1:1 CAMHS support, and he has his weekly sessions, I think he’d had about 3 months of those sessions when the CAMHS worker went, I think I’d like to get him diagnosed for ADHD, because I think he’s got ADHD. Ok, you’re CAMHS referring to CAMHS, that’s fine. So, they’ve just done that, and it just came back in October that yes, he is very ADHD I think he scored 98%, 99% on the QB tests and all of that. But the interesting thing is, from the day that he was told by his CAMHS worker he’s got ADHD, and then he came home and we spoke about it, and he said well what does that mean, and I said well thats just a label so that other people understand how your brain works, I said it doesn’t mean anything different for you, that’s all it means. Since he’s had that label, his behaviours have really calmed down. And I was speaking to his CAMHS worker last week and she said “in my 1:1 session with him, yes he is still hectic, he is a very hectic child, but the compulsive bits have completely gone since I had that conversation with him about him having ADHD, so now I’m questioning is it ADHD or is it trauma, because originally they were saying its trauma and then she was saying I’ve worked with him and the things we’ve been doing it should, y’know these needs are still presenting so highly I think there’s ADHD underlying as well, and that y’know then they were saying are we going to go medication route or not, so he was on the list for medication trialling but we still haven’t got an appointment, but then we’re now saying well actually he hasn’t got the compulsive thing, do we, is medication going to do anything for him because actually I think he’s a complex little man, and I think they are all interlinked, but y'know once he’s got, when he feels safe and he feels secure, and he knows he’s loved so he’s got all of those basic needs met actually he’s in a position where he can function and he’s going to always be active and need to be in a job where he can be active but actually we are seeing seeds of success, and although change to secondary school was very very traumatic, we’ve been doing some work with the EP with his secondary school, and the whole school staff are now just getting attachment training, which is interesting, and now that he’s got his safe space, and he’s only got 2 1:1 workers not 12 different 1:1 workers, and they agree with him each day which two lessons is he going to try and get into – because his target at the moment is get into two lessons a day, and he’s having success in that, and he’s choosing P.E., he’s choosing maths, computer science and Spanish. He’s not choosing any subject where you have to do lots of writing, but that’s fine, but y’know we’ve also taken a laptop in, and said y’know when you’re working 1:1 with him if he’s not in his lesson why aren’t you doing some of the things that he should be doing, why aren’t you speaking to your English department and finding out, actually what are some of the things that you would expect a primary child to be doing in English, because he’s missed so much of his learning over time because of his behaviour, he’s got gaps. And now, whenever he hits one of those gaps, you get an issue with his behaviour, and that’s what we had the whole way through primary school, whenever you hit a gap in his knowledge, that’s when you’d have a spike. So, we’ve been saying to them the last couple of years, why don’t you do some work to find out what his gaps are and build on those gaps so that he can then not feel threatened and he can move on. And y’know just writing is a real trigger for him. But he’s set up this Christmas card making factory and at the moment he’s writing on every single Christmas card. So, he can write...

I: So, it’s something about the context of the writing.

P: Yeah. And one of his LSAs left last week, and we knew when they took it down just to two LSAs that this one was going to be leaving at this stage. And they appointed another one who started at half term and had like a three-week handover and he said to me on Thursday morning he said, mummy can you bring some wrapping paper down, I went ok why, he said, Oh I’ve got some presents for Mr X, he said I’ve sorted it all out and I’ve written everything. I said “ok”. So I then went down, at the end of year 6 we made a box for his year 6 teacher, we made a survival kit and put a whole lot of things in and we put little cards with each thing about what it was and why it was, and just things to remember him by really. So, he’s made his own survival kit for this teacher. So, a stick box, so one of the toys he’d bought with his pocket money “so you can have some sticky fun and remember me”, a frog rubber as your sum-dog pet, now sum-dog pet is a maths programme they did together. Frutella remember the sweet times we had together. A world-stress ball because you’re travelling the world. A little teddy – that’s me, and a keyring because you’re the key to my success.

I: Oh, that’s so lovely, that’s so nice.

P: Y’know, and that’s what he did all on his own, y’know so you can see that is a child who really gets empathy, really gets relationships now and we’ve been working with him y’know that actually yes this relationships ending, but you can have a positive end to it and you can move on. Now fortunately that LSA who’s going, his mum still works at the school, and he knows his mum is still there and I said right so you can write letters to Mr X, and Mrs X will send them onto him, so you can still have contact. So he doesn’t, because what he used to do is any time he got to an end, well you get ripped away from things so you don’t have a chance to say goodbye, so at the end of any year you know your leaving your teacher, well I may as well break it down 3 weeks before the end, because you’re going anyway. So in his primary school at the end of year 5 we did some work on the advice of CAMHS with the staff in the school to say look actually he needs to see a positive end and be able to build that and do that relationship and the survival kit we did for his year 6 teacher was part of the work of actually this is how you can do this, so he knew he’d left something for his teacher so his teacher could survive without him. Yes? But then he’s done that himself for the next relationship that’s coming to end.

I: Yeah, that’s really impressive.

P: So, as I say he flips up and down the levels, and that’s a child who like four weeks ago the school were saying, we don’t think we can meet his needs in a mainstream school.

I: What do you put down to, or do you have an explanation for that, for the flitting between levels?

P: Why is that? Because he, I think, when he’s not, when he doesn’t feel safe he goes right the way back to the beginning, but because he’s now got all of the skills, once he’s in a secure place he’s actually quite emotionally secure at quite a high-level, because he’s had five-years of real stable family life, and all the things we’ve put in, we’ve done a lot of work on PACE with him, so we use the PACE approach a lot, a lot of therapeutic parenting, and it’s really worked for him, but when he has a problem, he goes right the way back down but then every time he goes back up, he’s going back through the levels a lot quicker than he did before. So, y’know in some respects, some days you sort of look at him and you think, you’re much more mature than an 11-year-old, and other days you look at him and think, y’know emotionally you really are 2 years today. And I also know from his behaviour where he is on that spectrum, so in the summer term, obviously coming up to we’re going to have a change, doing lots of work with him, coming to endings, he was having an awful lot of memories, and I would know from how he was and the position his body was in, I would know the time in his life the memory was from.

I: oh wow.

P: And so, he was having a lot of memories from when he was with mum and dad, and every time he had one of those memories he would be in the foetal position and he’d be gabbling at me, and lots and lots of baby language would come out. And then other ones, he’d be having a memory and I would look at him and I would say, this is a memory from when you were with [X] isn’t it? And then at the time he wasn’t able to talk to me about the memories, but he could write them down. And this is really interesting, because this is a child who didn’t like writing, so we put a big whiteboard on the wall in his bedroom, and he always had a notebook and pens by his bed and so sometimes he’d be in the middle of a really traumatic event and he’d be screaming and shouting but he could write. And he could write a couple of bits to me so I, I could then say ok, so if it’s from when he was a baby, I’d need to be saying different things to if it was with [X], and some of the memories from when he was with us and his brother was still abusing him, because a lot more has come out of him now being able to say the abuse his brother was carrying on when they shared a bedroom, and the abuse only stopped when we split their bedrooms at which point his brother then made an allegation against us. Because he’d lost control...

I: because he’d lost control.

P: Yeah? So it’s fascinating sort of looking at him and thinking of where we are, and then sort of working with other people around us because some other people around us are, well he’s just going to have to get used to it isn’t he, you can’t pander to his needs all of the time. Well, actually now, his reaction is not, he’s not being a naughty boy, actually he, that’s triggered a memory of past trauma, and if you haven’t been through that then its, very different. If you’ve grown up in a world where you didn’t have any ACES against you then its very different to somebody who’s had most of them against him. And, yeah ok, he is going to have to cope in the world, but there are things that we can put in place, to give him the skills that he needs to be able to do it. More and more of the work that I’ve been doing with him, then I come back into work and I think actually that has a bigger impact on how I am as a headteacher and what we’re doing in work. And actually in the area we’re in here with really high levels of deprivation, and we’ve got quite a lot of children in school because [city] has an extremely high threshold for social care involvement, extremely high threshold, so we’ve got children in school here who perhaps in other authorities would not still be with their parents. And the sort of therapeutic work we are needing to put in place for those children, so we’re doing, we’ve been doing a lot of work with the staff on the PACE approach, on attachment, because actually it’s not just children in care who have attachment needs, we’ve got lots of children in school who have attachment needs, erm, so yeah so that’s, it makes me look at things in a really different way, and actually makes me look at inclusion in a different way, because its easy to say, well that child’s causing a problem, and their behaviours causing a problem for the class, right that child needs to be out. But actually, what is it about them? I’ve got one year 3 girl today who is really struggling, she wants to go to a trip to the Maryrose on Wednesday, her class teacher wants her to go to the trip to the Maryrose on Wednesday, her mum wants her to go on the trip, her mums happy to come with her to go on the trip, but the actual, y’know we’ve said to her we need to make sure you’re safe to be on that trip, and she’s been extremely dysregulated all day because just the thought of it is too much for her, and she was in here working with me earlier, then I went out to a meeting I came back in, and her socks were on the floor and her jumper was here, and I went, her socks are off, she always takes her shoes and socks off when she’s struggling. And I was having a conversation with her after lunch and she’d been outside at lunchtime paddling in the puddles in her bare feet. And we were talking and I just said Oh I wondered where you’d gone I said, because I just saw these socks and I saw this jumper and I thought somebody had taken you away, like in the wizard of Oz, the wicked witch of the east just disappears and you just get left with this pile, I thought had that happened, she went no no no that’s ok, she said: I always take my shoes and socks off when I struggle. I thought again you’re a seven-year-old girl, you know. And I don’t think we always listen necessarily or tune in to what the children are saying, and to actually then have that time, and actually, what has she done for a lot of this afternoon? She’s been, in the year 1 shared area playing with the kitchen, she was making me cups of tea, she’s playing with the puppets, I thought actually you’ve gone back to a much younger child’s activities because you need to go back to a level to feel comfortable to be able to move back up to where you are. And it’s not always easy in schools to be able to accommodate that for the high number of children you need to be able to accommodate it for. That sort of nurturing provision, when actually the class teachers got the demands of yes but I’ve just got 30 children and I need to teach them and get them here, but if we don’t meet the emotional needs then they’re not in a position to be able to move on with their learning anyway. And that’s the real struggle, now in an education system where the impact of austerity is really really hitting. If we go back a few years when there was a lot more money in education, to have the additional staff. We’re now really seeing the impact of it, and I worry at the moment about this generation that we’ve now got coming through who the parents didn’t have the sure start centres to support them, so they haven’t had that early help, and y’know I don’t think it’s a surprise that at the moment in school we’ve got more children struggling with attachment needs than every before. I also don’t think it’s a surprise, because I think its linked to increasing technologies and the amount of y’know at home. They say they behave at home, well what do you do at home, they sit on an iPad or they sit on that. Well they’re engaged with something and you’re not having a relationship with them you’re not interacting with them. What happens the moment you try and take the iPad off them? You’ll probably have the, y’know...

I: That’s when you get it.

P: yeah, interesting times, so yeah, the attachment and trauma are really really key for so many of our young people.

I: Yeah, yeah, I think you’re right and I think it’s interesting to hear your reflections on how kind of things that have come from your experience as a foster carer then translating into the school setting as well...

P: and its, I mean over time, I’ve had a whole range of different looked after children in the school, and its really interesting because some of them display as having real needs and some of them don’t at all. It doesn’t mean their needs are any less. I’ve currently got a looked after girl in year 6 and she’s an absolute dream, y’know, she doesn’t display as having any issues at all, but, and then I’ve got a sibling group, one in reception one in year 1 and again the girl in year 1 she’s really bright she’s really bubbly, brother has more behavioural difficulties but not anything really. And I think some of it is linked to when they were taken away from parents but also the reasons they were taken away and maybe the neglect or things that they have seen, things that they have witnessed. And more and more I’m getting to think actually, it’s not just oh well they were taken away and because they were taken away younger that makes it easier. I don’t think it does actually you were taken away younger so actually if you had that at a young age it can have massive impact, as I’ve seen with our little man, y’know, things that happened when he was one are still affecting him now, and it’s not as simple as saying, well they’ve had therapy for that, I’ve got a friend who fosters and he fostered a 14 year old and he’s now 24, and when he was like this lad was 18 19 he was having all sorts of problems, and I said to my friend, but, think about what’s gone in his life “well he’s had counselling for that we’ve moved on”, well it still has an impact, he may have had counselling but actually it still has an impact, and I think y’know not fully understanding the impact that for a while did damage their relationship and although their relationship is back on track I think y’know it’s difficult. It is difficult, and you can’t just say suck it up, get over it, it’s not that simple. Y’know and I, my little man he’ll say “daddy doesn’t understand”, and I’ll say no no daddy doesn’t understand but that’s ok, let’s talk about it, let’s go through let’s help us understand, let’s do it. And I’ve had to do a lot of work with my husband on being more therapeutic to him and being more playful with him and not y’know, y’know, your way can’t be the only way, and yes you may want him to do that, but there’s different ways of getting him to do what you want. And so, your like with the PACE approach I do a lot of the playfulness with our young man, and that really works with him, and I do a lot of the curiosity, so in the summer he went on a fostering residential. And so, you would have thought that if you were going on a fostering residential that you would have had trained people there that they might be able to cope with children who have attachment and trauma issues. That’s what you would hope, so we get to, it’s been two days and I then get a phone call. “err, we’re having problems with him” I said ok, I said clearly what you’re telling me about his behaviour somethings triggered a memory, “well he’s locked himself in the bedroom and every time we go in the other door he runs out” and I said yeah chasing him isn’t gonna work, he needs to have space, but I tell you what the best thing you can do if you've got the staffing is to take him for a walk, and walk in a straight line with him get him to talk and then when he’s calmed down, walk back. Oh, it’s raining. I said put a coat on. Anyway, they didn’t do that, two hours later I get another phone call. “he’s bitten somebody you’ve gotta come to collect him now”. Well, you’re over an hour’s drive from where we are and actually my dads just had a fall and I’m waiting for the ambulance to arrive for him. So, I might be a little...so anyway, we did go down. When I went down to collect him, he was completely calm, he was chatting to all of the adults, as soon as he saw me, he burst into tears. And then when he was told he had to go home he said, but why? I like it here I’m happy here. And then it transpired, something had happened on the very first afternoon and they hadn’t actually, the way they’d dealt with it was very confrontational for him right from the beginning, but he was sent home because he’d bitten somebody. So he cried the whole journey home, that was the Wednesday, on the Friday he had a bath, and he suffers badly from psoriasis the stress of this flared all his psoriasis up, so I was putting cream on him and I went “what are these scratches on you”, oh so and so from camp did that, I said what’s this mark on your arm, oh that’s from where he bit me, I said I beg your pardon, that’s why I bit him back because it’s the only way I could stop him biting me. But, because when he gets in this state, he can’t communicate verbally they never listened to his side of the story, so he gets sent home. So I phoned them straight up at the camp and I went “err, so and so, I said actually I told you that he was, as soon as I went to pick the little man up he said oh he’d been swearing at me, so I said there you go I told you there was a trigger. Oh no no, we’ve not heard him swearing. Then when I phone them on the Friday, oh yes because of all his swearing he wasn’t working with anybody on Thursday. I thought you told me he didn’t swear? I said and we found this, and actually, oh well if he’d told us he’d bitten him first we would have sent both of them home. So, my little man, I went back in and I said I’ve spoken to them and they said they would have sent him home if they’d known, he said would I have been allowed to stay – and I thought I’m not going to turn round to him and say no – I said yes I think you probably would, because I thought in his mind he needed to know he hadn’t done anything wrong, but y’know you just think, that is with people who it was a trained teacher, a trained social worker and a trained foster carer. And then the foster carer had said oh well actually on the first day he snatched something from somebody, so I separated them and I did this, and I went really... that’s not a very therapeutic way of working with him. Y’know and it was supposed to be your going on this residential and he was really looking forward to it, and actually it ended up being a really traumatic experience for him. And y’know so...

I: Not great.

P: it’s not great, so just think even people y’know you think you should be able to know how to deal with things, and its when he’s in a situation like that and there are people really struggle I think oh actually your needs really are still. Because at home I get lulled into a false sense of security because I’ve just this absolutely gorgeous young man who’s really thoughtful and caring of everybody’s needs and then you suddenly, and y’know you say to him its bedtime he goes and gets changed and goes to bed y’know we don’t have any, we don’t have any massive dramas at home anymore, but I think because at home he feels so safe and he feels so secure that he doesn’t need to have the dramas.

I: That’s what’s lovely though isn’t it for you to be able to create an environment where he does feel safe and secure.

P: and its then how you can replicate that in a school environment, and that's really hard because not every adult buys into that. Y’know and I’ve got one situation with one of my teachers at the moment. It’s not a looked after child but it is a child who’s got, who’s had significant trauma in his life. And he has got significant attachment issues, which so many of them have. Well until he apologises, he can’t come back into my room! I thought well who’s the adult here because actually with what happened with that child, they don't think they’ve done anything wrong. Because if they swear at you when they’re dysregulated, they don’t actually necessarily know they’ve sworn, and you can present them with the evidence, you can show them CCTV footage but they don’t believe its them, so my one you know trashed his bedroom at home when he’s dysregulated, and then he’ll go back in his room and say who’s messed my bedroom up? Well you did that, no I didn’t, well actually yes you did when you were, because when they’re in that heightened state, when they're in their fight flight mode they don’t know what they’re doing they’re not using their rational brain, their amygdala’s taken over their rational brain hasn’t, so therefore don’t expect them to rationalise when their rational brain isn’t.

I: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

P: and y’know and if you haven’t waited long enough for them to calm down and then you try and deal with it when they’re not fully calm you’re just going to flip their lid quicker. So we’re doing a lot of work with staff on the brain and how things work and different ways of doing it and trauma related practice, but [city] as a city is a restorative, trying to be a restorative city, so we do a lot, everything, through a restorative approach, y’know and it all fits in really well with PACE with trauma based work y’know they’re all interlinked. So y’know, it is a fascinating journey.

I: Yeah, no it sounds it. Ok. Well thank you so much. This has been really helpful; it’s been really lovely to hear your kind of experiences from both as you said at home and then how’s that translated into things at school. So yeah, thank you. I don’t want to take up any more of your time.