Participant: F6

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

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Interview: CFB (I)

Interviewee: Participant F6 (P)

Age: 53

Sex: Female

Foster Carer Years: 8

I: If I could ask you to start, just get the demographic questions out of the way and just give me your age, gender and years of experience as a foster carer if that’s alright?

P: Yes, I’m 53 years old, I’m a qualified Primary school teacher, and a foster carer, I’ve been fostering for 8 – just over 8 years now, and I’ve fostered 50 children in 8 years.

I: Wow, that’s a lot of children

P: It is, but then when we say short-term some of them could just be over night, or 18 months, 2/3/4 years you could have short term.

I: Yeah of course, ok, lovely, and is there a, so we’re thinking about primary school aged children with challenging behaviour, and I don’t know if there’s a particular child that comes to mind in that category or if there’s a couple that come to mind.

P: yes, yea I have got a couple, at least a couple [laughs]

I: ok, well if we could start off by picking one individual in particular that we’ll at least start our conversation focused around and then if we digress later on then that’s fine. So, with that child in mind then, could I just ask you to start by just describing that child to me.

P: She was dual heritage little girl, she came to me, when I think when she was five. Very beautiful smile, beautiful looking little girl, but very undernourished, obviously her hair wasn’t looked after it was all brittle and dry, her skin was dry, but sad, but so y’say what’s behind a smile? She had a smile that was from ear to ear, but really behind that was a lot of sadness, but to look at her, most people would say “wow that smile, she’s beautiful, she’s this, she’s that”, but there was more to it.

I: Ok, and what was her behaviour like day to day?

P: initially she was very – what we call the honeymoon period – very, wanted to please you all the time, just wanted to make you happy and hopefully it was just going to be me and her in her life and that’s what she would have loved.

I: Ok, yeah, so that was her – so did you say she came to you short term but that was her kind of...?

P: Yeah, again because of the court process she came to me straight from a family member so came straight to my house then with very little information about her really. I had. But thought, y’know, she fitted in with our, the household really.

I: Yeah, ok. And were there times when her behaviour was particularly good, and you had nice experiences.

P: It was really good with me, but if anybody else tried to get close to me, say for example, my daughter or my husband there would probably be a big blow-up a big trigger of anger, really, y’know, took a long time to understand really what she was trying to do and what she was trying to say. I mean she was with me probably 18 months, but it did take a long time to actually work out really how her little mind was working really. She would just try to – I would describe it as she would just want it to be me and her - if she could get inside me, I think she would have done, y’know, wouldn’t want anyone else to touch anywhere near me, y’know she’s mine and no one else’s. And so, would be disruptive to everyone else around, actually probably secretly nasty to anyone else around, other children that I might have in placement, she would be particularly nasty to and then they would come and tell me, because it would all be done on the sly.

I: So, what do you think was kind of underpinning those behaviours?

P: Home life I think really, she was diagnosed with reactive attachment disorder, erm, so and I really understood very little about that really and I mean I’m ok now, I’ve got to grips with what the disorder is, but at the time I had no idea really that someone so little could be so angry, so so aggressive. She loved you but hated you if that makes sense, she just, she really wanted to be with you but also she didn’t want to get close, frightened of getting close to you so she’d actually be horrible as well. Really sort of Jekyll and Hyde personality. She had a lot of heritage issues. I think she was probably the only dual heritage; she had a sister that was white from a white dad, same mother, different fathers, but lived in that household. When she came to me, the younger sibling stayed in that household, so as far as she could see it was because she was black, she looked like she did - that’s why she was moved on to me, and if she had long white hair, she would be – this is what she actually said to me – she would probably still be at home. So massive. And the father not being around didn’t help. Came to me with no contact either,

I: With anyone?

P: No.

I: Oh wow, ok. Ok, so just talk to me about, you mentioned that she could get quite angry, what would that look like?

P: A typical example would be at school, she would be contained all day at school, she was ok in a learning environment where it was play based, so in her foundation years she was absolutely fine, but to move to year 1 was really hard for her. She could control the play in foundation, she could control the people around her, the friends that she picked she could manipulate and play her game that she wanted to play, and everyone followed her around. But as soon as she was doing some more formal learning, I think she found that really difficult. Really really difficult. So, she would come out of school, and then probably get to the car, and she would explode. I’d start to drive, she’d take her shoes off, she’d throw them at me when I’m trying to drive, she’ll throw anything she could get her hands on at me while I’m driving, so we’d have to stop the car. Really quite dangerous things that she’d actually do, but it was just explosive, she’d been contained all day. You know this is the time that she was with someone that she loved, that she could actually explode to, and it was trying really before it gets to that point, start to learn really when that triggers going to start, how are you going to do it before it actually gets to that stage, because when they’re in that heightened stage you can’t get close to them you can’t get anywhere near. You can’t explain you can’t, you have to let them come down slowly, so it’s tricky.

I: Yeah, yeah, it does sound tricky.

P: In the house she would pick things up throw them no matter what, she’d turn tables up she’d kick and hit and whatever she wanted to do, if she was really angry with herself she would probably, she’d get a duvet and stuff it in her mouth and pull it so hard that her teeth would bleed. She was so sort of angry with everything. Pull her hair, sort of self-harm. And this is at five.

I: And what do you think, you talked a little bit about that she’d been holding things in at school and it was now that she was at home – or not even at home yet – but she was with someone that she kind of trusted and had that kinda relationship with, that that was when she could show some of those behaviours or could kinda have that meltdown. But what do you think, what was driving, why did we get to the point of needing to have a meltdown? What was going on?

P: I think she’s found the whole environment very difficult to deal with, y’know, she still had a lot of unanswered questions, she’d just lost everything she knew. All family that she did know and then come somewhere else, and then she knew that she probably wasn’t gonna to stay with me forever, didn’t want that to happen, she would always say “because I’ve been with you a long time that means long-term, so that means I’ll stay with you” so all those confusing sort of little triggers in her mind, but I think just really so much damage was done in her early years that by 5 really she hadn’t addressed any of that information and I think that’s really. She wanted, y’know she wanted a mummy and daddy she wanted to live this happy ever after life, but it just didn’t, it was far from it. Y’know all the nice things we’d do y’know she would always wanna wreck them at some point. I think, take the example of Christmas dinner, y’know, you spend hours doing your Christmas dinner, then you all sit at the table. Just for no reason at all she puts her hands in her dinner, puts her dinner in to my plate – here into here – and then smashed the whole lot across the floor here, just chucked everything y’know and you just see red then and you think, and then trying to give empathy for that, it was very very difficult at that point. That sort of level of disruption when she’d actually been with us quite a long while by then but she still felt that that’s what she needed to do, and to show that empathy can be quite tricky when you’re in that, you’ve spent all day, all that planning – I don’t know if you’ve ever done that but oh my goodness – it was really really hard.

I: So, taking that example what do you think, why do you think that happened with the throwing on the floor?

P: It could be the fact that a trigger of Christmas. She hadn’t really experienced a Christmas before. Come down to Santa giving her the world, sacks of presents from everybody actually that was too much to deal with. And subsequently from there I learnt that really Christmas is quite tricky for them, a lot of children. That you move the presents into different rooms, so that in the morning you might spend a little bit with those presents, and then have a rest from it and then go to another room later on, maybe after dinner and do more presents. But Christmas can be really over whelming, the whole thing. Too much, so excited, but like “I don’t deserve any of this, why is that all done for me?” it’s that switch of. It was easy just to click into those sort of moods. But we did get lots of help from then on, we had play therapy at school and all those sorts of things that helped. But she was so adorable even like the headteacher wanted to be her advocate, that sort of thing. Yeah, she was lovely lovely girl. And I still love her with all my heart now, it’s really weird. And yet she caused me the most upset and grief and yet she’s the one I think about probably more than any of them, strange really.

I: Why do you think that is?

P: I think we had to work out so much together, the bond was very very strong and I think we learnt together really and she learnt that I would protect her I would look after her and I would be the one that answered those tough questions if someone asked her. She always knew that she could rely on me. She knew I’d be there at the school gate. She’d love to come out and say “mummy, mummy, mummy” and I sort of said to her, y’know, I’m foster mummy, but you have got a mummy, y’know, rather than knowing the fact that she’s moving on somewhere and then she’ll probably want to call them mummy and then all these mummies they’re not her mummy, she has a mummy that couldn’t look after her so it’s really getting that into her as well. And it’s the loss of not even knowing who her father was or is, where is he? why didn’t he want me? and really as young as five they do have that level of understanding and its understanding that they have a voice. So many people wanna talk about them and make decisions about them, but at five really, she could have if I asked her, y’know put it in age appropriate terms, she could probably tell me what she wanted, her wishes and feelings.

I: Yeah, bless, ok. You mentioned earlier when we were talking about school and how the kind of play based curriculum, early years suited better in terms of because it suited those sorts of controlling behaviours and manipulating the situation. Where do you think those behaviours in particular came from, that need for control?

P: Obviously I think in her early years I don’t think there was any control, she had any control of her life, it was done and lots of wicked things happened in that household that she was able to tell me about and they were beyond – the fear and everything else that she did experience – were way beyond anything that she could comprehend or take control of, so I think you’re not gonna get anyone close to me, so I’m going to make sure that I make sure that I’m alright. So, fight flight sort of scenario, that sort of thing. Protecting yourself, whizzy - y’know initially, not really knowing, y’know it could almost manifest itself as ADHD she was very whizzy at times and I think that’s the deep trauma that she’s suffered and that not being addressed.

I: and were there, what were some of the behaviours, we’ve talked about some specific examples, like the Christmas dinner, but were there – what was most challenging at home in terms of her behaviour.

P: Erm, I think probably, she didn’t want my husband anywhere near as such, she didn’t really like men, so she would do things to drive him mad, just to get him out the way. But initially when this is all going on, you don’t really, when you’re sucked into it, you don’t really realise what is actually going on, but they try their best to get between you, cause arguments between you, he’ll be saying “but that’s not acceptable” and I’ll be saying “eh...”, so she’ll be causing that sort of friction between my husband and myself, my daughter at the time, she was living at home, but she didn’t like the closeness of us – if I was hugging my daughter, she’d be in the middle, she’d be on the ground trying to get between the two of us, “she’s my [foster carer], she’s my [foster carer]”, that sort of thing.

I: When you said that at the time when you’re in it its harder to see that kind of I guess that bigger picture of what might be going on. What do you think at the time you were thinking was like where, what was your understanding at the time of those behaviours? That kind of...

P: I felt that she was grinding me down. It was getting to the stage then really we needed more professional input that wasn’t really there, and you’re starting to burn out with the level of what it was for one small little girl and the level of disruption, madness in your house and you realise it’s just not working, you need some other help, but when we talk about help, it really wasn’t there, so you would go to your social worker, and y’know with my level of training y’know I know how children learn, I know, so to be presented with this sort of level of behaviour and not really quite understanding what reactive attachment disorder is as such, y’know. And then going to CAMHS and them do assessment and that’s as far as it goes, and that’s where we were left. Y’know because their moto at the time, or their thing was if the child’s not in long-term care really, we can’t work with them. But I said “you’re telling me, for the next 1, 2, 3, 4 years, no-one’s going to give me any help, I’m going to be left on my own, to do this on my own?”. And they were thinking it’s more like, she’ll be leaving you next week – No, short term care is anything from overnight to three years/ four years, 18 months average, y’know they needed to really restructure or rethink their feelings; where now, we’re talking about a whole new, through my pushing them and saying to them and working with the local authority, explaining really what wasn’t there, getting in touch with the head of CAMHS at a meeting I was at, and they asked me what I thought of CAMHS and I said “I don’t think anything of CAMHS” at a very corporate meeting, corporate parenting meeting that I was sitting on the panel, all these heads of areas, and I said that to them, and since then, now you can refer yourself to CAMHS, you can have, there’s a direct line through, you can get lots and lots of support now. They come to support groups, psychologist psychiatrists, y’know there every month or every other month, you can ring to talk to anyone, that wasn’t there a few years ago – even as much as probably a year ago. That wasn’t there. Y’know a lot of people struggling with these types of children unfortunately. Y’know you wanna do your best by them but really your burnt out but then really you’re not much good after that really, y’know you need time to rest and have the respite away from them, and I think that’s what we were finding was helping. She went to, we organised a regular respite every other weekend, so it helped the relationship and sustained the placement. Which was really good, we found then we’d have breathing space to go out maybe at the weekend, because with that level of behaviour we couldn’t just get any a babysitter in or a friend because I wouldn’t want them exposed to that level of aggression, so you become a bit isolated with it. So that’s how it was with that one.

I: Ok, thank you, that’s been really helpful. I was just wondering if you’d had a, I mean it sounds like you probably do, but if there’s a particularly positive memory or something that you remember from that time from when she was placed with you that kinda stands out at all?

P: I think watching her grow, I mean she grew 10cms in a year, she grew three foot, shoe sixes in a year. She went from a petite, undernourished, skinny, unhealthy little girl to a vibrant, happy, beautiful little girl, y’know you could see the smile, you could see her face, you could. Before you could see straight through her you would see the sadness, then those lovely eyes they’re glossy and she’s looked after, her skins glowing, y’know that, and the sipping to school and skipping down the drive. And so happy, and her friends come for tea, y’know she’s got friends, so they come to tea. And all that, when you see that that’s when you realise, “cor you did an amazing job”, y’know thats when you y’know, you seek products for the hair, making sure she gets all the right things y’know their hair can be quite brittle and challenging, and with that type of hair you need products especially for their hair, y’know and some of them they have family products that they use in their families, it’s just finding out what they used, so that you actually made her feel that y’know she was properly looked after. So yeah, it was those, just watching them flourish, from really sad sad, head down sort of look, to, really jolly, happy, y’know running around, just really lovely to see, and just catching her before she would trigger. Or knowing the things that would make her snap.

I: Yes, yeah, when you get to know them that well.

P: Oh absolutely, and then we had people in to show us techniques to help her with her anger, things to do when she feels like the volcano’s building up, some of the things that would help her. Her breathing, she was shown exercises to help with her breathing, and always said “oh y’know you’ll help me you’ll help me”. And then afterwards she’s oh so sorry, she’s exhausted but she’s so sorry that she behaved in that way, but its really acknowledging to her that you understand how she feels. Y’know, rather than saying cor, your behaviour was out of order, no “I can see that you were upset, I can see that you were, y’know and just the way that you approach her, because all she wants after that is just to be cuddled. And that’s all she wanted.

I: And how do you think that, your understanding of what was driving the behaviour changed how you responded to the behaviour? You talked a little bit about Christmas day and actually when things got thrown on the floor, and “now I need to respond with empathy”, where do you think that understanding, responding in that way, where do you think that came from, or was that informed by...

P: I think it’s been taught really going to see people that actually understood. Training within foster care is brilliant really, for our local authority the training programme is extensive, really really good, and if it’s not on the programme you can request, say look I’ve got this problem, is there somewhere you can send me that can help me with this? And they’re very good at trying to find things to help people keep their placements together really.

I: Oh great, ok. Perfect. Well, is there anything that we haven’t kind of talked about or covered that you think would be particularly kind of relevant or?

P: I think as a teacher, if I put my teaching hat on, I think when you graduate and go into school, behaviour management is not always, your understanding of behaviour management, you don’t always get taught that, if you don’t go to a placement in your uni years that’s got good behaviour management strategies, I think when you come into classroom, if you had a looked after child come in, its hard to understand really what it’s all about, and I think more training for primary teachers into understanding challenging behaviours and what it is. It’s not a case of the child being naughty, it’s the child expressing an issue, a problem in their life that they want dealt with, but they don’t know how apart from being aggressive towards you to sort it out. When you’ve got a class of 30, and that explosive behaviour or a child chucking things at you all the time, you’ve got to think about the other 29 children that are in your class, so I still think – I don’t know if its improved since my teaching, I mean I graduated 2006, so things may have moved on since then and that's better – so I think better knowledge or training for primary school teachers. I know that the degree course is jam-packed with everything I think you do need to have something, or more help with behaviour management strategies to support those, I think they would be more readily available outside agencies. We had to pay privately for the play therapy through the Virtual School, paid someone to come in because the NHS was like come every 3 months, give you a few things or Speech and Language is another that they paid privately for us as well because they’d give you the exercises, go away and come back in three months, what if the next day you don’t quite understand one of these exercises, who do you talk to – no one. We had someone come in once or twice a week and that was all paid for, and that’s purely because they were a looked after child. So I think in that way it was really really good, but those children perhaps that just fall, not quite looked after, that are in that sort of area that don’t get the help, so again, it’s the tools you need and having those people to come in and support that child in school in that environment, I mean, it was great in my time, but again moneys tight and are they still paying for children to do that now? I don’t know and then it’s the child that loses out. So, yeah, tricky. And people’s level of understanding obviously about these children's behaviour is really tricky. So they don’t often understand really what is going on in that child’s mind, that therapeutic parenting is what’s needed, but not everyone’s got that, everyone’s got adequate parenting, but that’s not really, we’re getting more and more children coming in that have got really quite specific issues that need to be addressed, and I think really continual training for the foster carer but also for teachers going in, I didn’t have that level of behaviour management really, I didn’t see that much I was going to very nice schools with little village schools where there wasn’t that level of disruption and I think y’know more schools need to be, more with the degree courses need to provide more if they’re not already doing it, but it was something was lacking in my time.

I: Yeah ok, that’s interesting, thank you.

P: That’s alright.