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| **Theme** | **Subtheme** | **Description** | **Quotes** |
| Description of Child | Positive Characteristics | FCs often described the child using positive characteristics. For some, this was in response to the question “can you describe the child?”, whilst for others the characteristics were dropped in later in the conversation, almost in response to a discussion focused so heavily on challenging behaviour. | “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.” *Participant F5*  “He was always friendly, chatty, smiley, loved going out” *Participant F7*  “He’s a lovely character, he’s bubbly, he’s got a lot of energy, very friendly, very interested in certain things” *Participant F1* |
| ‘Then’ Descriptions | Almost all FCs at some point made reference to how the child was when they first arrived. For some this was as detailed as the physical description of the child, and their response upon arriving at the FC’s house. Whilst for others it referred more to the traits and behaviours seen shortly after they arrived. | “His head was down, he used to look at you through sort of eyes that were almost closed, and he seemed to be in like a bit of a rage. You could tell he wasn’t well looked after, his skin was in a terrible state very rough, very cracked. He was itching all over, bleeding in fact where he was scratching.” *Participant F1*  “When he came, he was six, but it was like looking after an 18-month year old. He was, he could speak but it was very difficult to understand what he was saying, he had very little, he was very volatile, very, very unable to regulate his emotion. He was a hypervigilant, he was scared the whole time, and would run about touching the walls, everything, very very little eye contact, very little sort of engagement really. Would go off with anybody, very little idea that there was any, who he was. And a high level of sexualised behaviour. He was exhibiting a high level of sexualised behaviour, and, verbally and in his actions, mostly towards towards me, not towards my husband towards me. That was how he was when he came. He needed absolutely 24 hours almost, he was awake a lot of the night, he had a lot of bad dreams, he was awake a lot. Found it very difficult to go to sleep wouldn’t sleep til about 10 11 at night, was screaming around upstairs, awake several times in the night scared. And so, it was extremely intense to and to to, that’s how he was when he arrived.” *Participant F7* |
| *Lack of information regarding child’s background.*  One element in particular that was highlighted was the dearth of information given to FCs about the child that they are going to, and now are, looking after. | “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” *Participant F4*  “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” *Participant F6* |
| Change over time | Almost all FC made reference at some point to the changes that they had seen over time in the child. These changes were often in their behaviours, but also in relation to their building of attachments. The changes described were also often caveated with the notion that they were still challenging. | “And you think actually, from, this is taking hours, to where you are has been an absolutely incredible journey.” *Participant F5*  “so it its exhausting, and actually what we did notice though, was as he settled and as he became more regulated and more attached to us actually he would be able to separate a bit, because he became more aware of who he was and actually he could see us as separate people and he could just be on his own for a bit” *Participant F7*  “But he was, he was transformed, absolutely transformed, I mean he’s still challenging and he’s still a long way to go, but actually, y’know he is totally transformed from that.” *Participant F7*  “he’s massively improved. Still room for improvement, but we’re getting there.” *Participant F10* |
| Challenging Behaviour Varied but Intense | Intensity | The type of challenging behaviour described by the FCs was relatively varied and included self-harm, sleeping difficulties, violence, and sexualised behaviours. However, one common theme across the behaviours was the intensity of them, either in terms of time (the persistence of a low-level behaviour), or explosive meltdowns. | “So, the challenging behaviours was the intensity that he required, it was like a baby who needed to be with you all the time, but he is six. So that’s hard work, that’s all through the night, and evenings as well.” *Participant F7*  “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...” *Participant F4*  “It is, but it’s not uncommon which I think makes it harder, because of the consistency of it, I think if that sort of thing happened once a month it would be like woah ok, this is, I’ve done something here that’s not working. Today was a bad day kind of thing, but its, it can happen 3 or 4 times in a day she’s like that, she’s so over-stimulated and over-aroused all the time.” *Participant F3* |
| Aggression | One of the most common behaviours described was aggression. This included physical violence directed towards others, verbal aggression, and destruction of property. | “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” *Participant F6*  “it’s nearly bed time, and he just basically screamed at me, and then started punching at me like that. So, I moved away from him and I said to him, [partner] do you want to come and take over here because he’s got quite aggressive.” *Participant F10*  “so hence he would do things to cope with that, his coping mechanism was maybe to go and have a bit of another child at school he would have a bit of a wrestle which he shouldn’t have been doing and maybe he would even hit the child which we got called in a few times about that.” *Participant F9* |
| Jekyll and Hyde | FCs often described the behaviour as unpredictable, like flipping a switch, or exploding. It wasn’t necessarily that they were unaware of what had triggered the behaviour or what was underpinning it, just that the child often changed quickly. | “she’s quite a complex child, and she’s lovely with it, she really lights up a room, she walks in if she’s in a good mood, she walks in and it’s just like someone’s switched a light on. It’s amazing, she’s such a lovely person, and yet when she’s in a bad mood or she’s struggling with something, she’s quite the opposite. She walks in and it’s like someone’s shut the curtains. Like a sink hole. So, yeah, she’s quite difficult to balance and judge in that way, but she’s adorable.” *Participant F3*  “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” *Participant F6*  “And then she would flip, often without an obvious trigger and we’d be like, “oh my goodness, where’s this come from?”” *Participant F4* |
| Explanation of Challenging Behaviour | Behaviour not chosen | FCs often made reference to the fact that the behaviour isn’t a choice, and that the child is not naughty. There were also references made to children’s diagnoses and whether this might be a reason for the behaviours. | “I knew that there was going to be a reason to it, there’s always like logic in the chaos” *Participant F3*  “he settles in quicker now than he did before, but I still think his challenging behaviour is more to do with his ASD than being naughty, being a naughty child, because when he’s yeah. He’s incredibly good. He wants to help” *Participant F10*  “It’s not a case of the child being naughty, it’s the child expressing an issue” *Participant F6* |
| Reason for Behaviour unknown | This refers to the notion that FCs were sometimes unable to work out what was underpinning the specific behaviour. However, alongside this was also the sentiment expressed in the other sub-themes that the child is not responsible for their behaviour and that it is often underpinned by something bigger from their early experiences. | “these things will still happen and you think, well is it them, part of what they learnt, was it some sort of device they had to gain attention, or a hundred and one different things, a hundred and one different things why these things, sometimes there is a reason, sometimes there is no reason” *Participant F1*  “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” *Participant F5* |
| Result of early experiences | Often when discussing what was underpinning the child’s challenging behaviours, it was often brought back to elements of their previous experiences | “Yeah, and certainly you see how the effect of trauma, how it stopped everything, it just stopped his brain being able to grow because he just had to survive” *Participant F7*  “y’know I totally attribute it to his past experiences. It’s not him, he’s just a little boy, poor little boy” *Participant F7* |
| *Emotional Experiences*  This sub theme encapsulates the idea that some of challenging behaviours stemmed from emotional consequences of their previous home life and experiences. | “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” *Participant F6*    “my impression was he was downed a lot as a child and therefore didn’t think he was up to any good. He would say y’know “I’m not any good, I can’t do anything”. Really really quick “I can’t do it” would come really quickly.” *Participant F8*  “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.” *Participant F4*  “So y’know we would take away the, cause he had difficulty making choice actually, and I think it was because, our understanding was, it didn't matter what he chose he always lost it. Because my understanding from his background would be, he was given loads of toys, but he never got to keep them, they were always sold again I think to provide money. That’s my guess I don’t know that for definite. so he never had anything of his own that he ever kept, so to him, making a choice was really hard, because it was always, what are you going to lose next, in some ways” *Participant F8* |
| *Physical Experiences*  This sub theme refers to the lasting impact that the neglect and abuse had in terms of physical development, but also learnt behaviours. | “So, when he’s doing that to us, at home, I think, actually he is just a little boy and he is just living out this awful stuff that he has seen.” *Participant F7*  “she has several difficulties with learning and social interaction that mostly stems from early neglect.” *Participant F3*  “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”” *Participant F4* |
| *Survival Behaviours*  This refers to behaviours that were considered challenging in the current environment, but would previously have served the function of ensuring safety and survival. | “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” *Participant F4*    “he was hyper, he was hypervigilant – “what’s that?”, and he would notice everything, absolutely everything. Even to the extent he would say, oh you’ve put nail polish on. And I just thought, kids at that age do not notice things like that” *Participant F8*    “so I think that’s the difference that the survival instinct initially was to grow up for her whereas for the other one was to not.” *Participant F3* |
| *Triggers*  The notion that behaviour was triggered was often given as an explanation for the behaviour. Specifically, that it was things that they had experienced in their home life that contributed to the triggers. | “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” *Participant F6*    “When she’s really really struggling, she finds transitions hard, and that’s any transition from, she’s reading a book and you say “it’s going to be tea time in 5 minutes you need to come and set the table please while I plate up” that means that she has to leave the book, move rooms, change activity, that’s too much for her to process, on a bad day that will result in a meltdown.” *Participant F3* |
| Behaviour Management | Being consistent | This was often a preemptive approach that consisted of structure, stability, consistency in responses from the FCs and the FCs being a realisable and available adult for the children. | “She always knew that she could rely on me. She knew I’d be there at the school gate.” *Participant F6*  “we sort of regulated his day first of all, so we had very very clear routines, food, of eating of mealtimes of what happened in the day, to try and regulate his body really.” *Participant F7* |
| Being adaptive | Alongside a need for consistency in response, was also the notion that different children needed different things from the adults around them, and therefore you had to adapt your response according to the specific child, and/or the specific situation. | “we have very different parenting skills depending on the children in our care, so we’re very adaptive, it’s not a one shoe fits all kind of household and I think you have to be like that to be a good foster carer” *Participant F3*    “you had to try and gauge the situation very quickly and then temper it with how you would deal with it” *Participant F1*  “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.” *Participant F4* |
| Pre-empting issues | This referred to FCs getting to know their children, learn their triggers and what behaviours indicated that they were escalating, this meant they were able to put strategies in place before there was a bigger meltdown. | “and even with his behaviour if he was y’know playing with his toys and things like that, if he was getting fed up with one or starting to get, y’know starting to run around and you could just see that the energy levels were getting too high, it would be a case of “right we’re going to play with two toys, which two is it going to be” and the rest would get put away and then.” *Participant F8*  “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” *Participant F6*  “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” *Participant F5* |
| Providing safety, security and love | The FCs often made reference to the impact that being in a different environment had on the children’s behaviour – for the better. The sense that being in a home in which their psychological needs was a reason why they saw less behaviours over time. | “But yeah, we just kind of went with it and answered his questions because we felt that was the best way to help him to feel more secure.” *Participant F8*    “removal from the abuse and the neglect. And giving him, nurturing, clear, consistent, warm, caring, very very controlled environment, safety, warmth, predictable” *Participant F7*  “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.” *Participant F5* |
| Teaching new skills | Often the FCs mentioned new skills that they were teaching the children they cared for which contributed to a reduction in the challenging behaviours they were seeing. The types of skills taught ranged from emotional literacy to table manners. | “He’s got table manners now, when he came to us he’d just scoff his food like that, he’d just sit on the chair like this with his leg hanging down and just...I had to teach him to sit at the table, had to teach him to eat with a knife and fork, y’know, going back to basics when you have a child, and it was about, when you ask for something please and thank you, not I want or give me” *Participant F10*  “Never be cross, just say to him, we really understand that he’s got some really big feelings going on about that, and that’s his body trying to tell us because he can’t use his words to tell us what’s gone on so his body is telling us and it would be lovely if he could use his words or he could write it down that would be great, but if he can’t that’s ok because his body’s doing the job, but as he gets older he might be able to do that, and we just clear it up and it’s no big deal.” *Participant F2*  “we spent hours with him just playing games, helping him to win helping him to lose, showing him how to lose gracefully, and that sort of thing I mean these things are not over night, they don’t happen overnight.” *Participant F8* |
| Drawing on knowledge and training | FC often made reference to the training that they had received, and to specific concepts that they would only be aware of through additional research and training into support looked after children. | “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.” *Participant F6*  “My parenting with her is still that consistent sort of pace parenting” *Participant F3* |
| *Therapeutic parenting*  This was the area of further knowledge and training that was mentioned most consistently across the foster carers. Some mentioned therapeutic parenting by name, whilst others described therapeutic approaches, or therapeutic parenting techniques such as ‘time-in’. | “If, and the other thing, the other thing that I was very much aware of was as a parent I always used to feel that and it was reinforced in some of the training that we got is, especially with therapeutic parenting, they need to know that you know exactly what’s going on and you’re in control.” *Participant F8*  “very sort of therapeutic parenting, of understanding that this is a traumatised child, that you cannot, it’s not the way of parenting another 9 year old, you have to parent differently.” *Participant F7* |
| Impact for foster carers | Emotional Impact | There were many different elements of the fostering process that created an emotional impact on the FCs, ranging from the emotional impact of the challenging behaviour, to the emotions associated with the child’s background and being in the care system. | “And I mean y’know being a, the foster caring it is difficult because we’re dealing with all this y’know for the first year he was having contact with his parents, and I would y’know I knew them and I saw them, and that's hard, that’s hard” *Participant F7*  “But it actually, he was very challenging the first six months, and we really struggled a lot. And I found it really exhausting” *Participant F10*  “And she went “I DON’T CARE I HATE YOU” and then moved her arm out and started biting her hand, erm, and then, ran out of the room and upstairs and was jumping in her room and throwing things around and banging about, erm. Yeah and I just sort of cleared a space on this sofa and sat down and felt very defeated by the whole thing” *Participant F3* |
| Isolating | FCs talked about feeling isolated, often because of other’s perceptions of the child’s challenging behaviour, or family and friends not understanding the behaviour management approaches undertaken by the foster carers. | “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.” *Participant F6*  “yeah that struck me just how, how isolated you can become, I mean we didn’t go that many places, and I remember saying all throughout that placement, which was over a year, y’know how isolated we were.” *Participant F8*  “and he’ll throw things or he’ll break things which is funny because if you sat and met him nobody would believe that, nobody would believe that they would say oh he’s really sweet. And he is, but he’s got this, he’s got an inner rage, they’ve both got an inner rage.” *Participant F2* |
| Positive reflections | Despite all the challenges and the emotional impact of being a foster carer, there were many positive reflections made. | “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.” *Participant F6*  “And all that, when you see that that’s when you realise, “cor you did an amazing job”” *Participant F6* |
| *Delighting in Progress*  Many of the FCs took pride in the progress that the children had made, and you could sense a delight in sharing these positive reflections. | “To the point where yes, we rejoiced when he would sometimes just run upstairs to get something on his own, y'know being able to do that was a huge step for him, huge step for him” *Participant F7*  “you know we’ve really reclaimed that childhood for her which I’m quite proud of doing to be honest because it’s a very difficult thing to do when you get someone that precocious” *Participant F3*  “And you think actually, from, this is taking hours, to where you are has been an absolutely incredible journey” *Participant F5* |
| *Hopes for the future*  FCs often made reference to the progress children had made so far and that they had confidence they would now be ‘ok’. | “I mean because my background in the psycho- in the therapy stuff it was like living it all the time, and actually seeing all this stuff that you’d read in textbooks, actually happening to this child and seeing the effect of nurturing, consistent, warm, safe care environment from 2, my husband was very much a part of this, from 2 y’know, I mean we’re not perfect there were times where we got it wrong but within a framework of this is just fine consistent normal caring stuff, and helping him to regulate himself, the difference that this made to his childhood and you could almost see his brain growing and the pathways coming, it was just amazing to watch really, and seeing who he is now and where, I mean he has a chance now, he has a chance now to live a life.” *Participant F7*  “Now, if he can say that and know what that means, which he does know what that means, he can then have life can’t he? He knows what the boundaries are. He knows what happened, he knows what shouldn’t happen, he can do that, that was just enormous actually, and him verbalising that to us.” *Participant F7*    “That’s why I said he was just classic, classic traumatised child [laughs]. But, y’know, there’s hope. There is hope.” *Participant F8*  “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” *Participant F5* |
| Consequences of child’s early experiences | Impact on Education | The child’s educational progress was often commented mostly in reference to the child not having previously been in an emotional state conducive to learning and were therefore not working at their age level. | “unfortunately because of all the environmental reasons he was very behind he’s erm, he’s had a cognitive assessment and everything is bang where it should be but he really is struggling at school catching up.” *Participant F2*  “he is not stupid, he’s he’s learnt, so any sort of academic stuff had stopped though so school was prfff, y’know, but, and it took a year and half for him to be able to start to learn, and this last year he has started to read. So he’s 9, so he’s way behind, and I don’t know if he’ll ever catch up” *Participant F7*  “He was really clever, really clever young lad, but had never been in an emotional place to learn, so he was quite behind at school, and as he settled, you could see the educational side of him catching up. Actually, the news we’ve had from his foster, his adoptive parents is that he now is working at his age level” *Participant F8* |
| Negative consequences of challenging behaviour for child | There were many comments made in relation to consequences of the challenging behaviour of the child, including access to activities and longevity of placements. | “so I put his name down and then he didn’t have a place and you think oh well maybe next year, put his name down again, got a place, lovely. When it came to filing in all the paperwork and they realised that he had additional needs, all of a sudden his place disappeared and he didn’t have a place.” *Participant F2*  “but so extreme behaviour, and this lad in the end, he wasn’t with us long, he had to go to not even another family he had to go to one of these units for very damaged children, which I think he’s still at” *Participant F1*  “but the carers that he was with although they were experienced carers, found his behaviour very difficult and too challenging, and then he came to us” *Participant F7* |
|  | Re-living experiences | This sub theme encompasses all the factors associated with being a looked after child that lead to you reliving your past experiences. For example, ongoing disclosures, contact, unanswered questions. | “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.” *Participant F5*  “One of the hard things – at that particular point we were able to be more specific, but one of the hard things in fostering is there are no definites, so you can’t make any promises to the kids and say that, oh this will happen or that will happen, because half the time, you don’t know yourself, and that as an adult is really frustrating and difficult to work with, so as a child, I really get how they must be totally freaked out by it.” *Participant F8*  “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” *Participant F6* |
|  |  | *Changes of placement*  By the nature of talking to FCs, all the children they had worked with had experienced at least one move from home to a foster placement. However, one sub theme was the ongoing changes of placement between carers and family members that many children experienced. | “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” *Participant F5*  *“*But then actually what happened was, his sister went for adoption, about this time last year, well September last, September ’18, because she was going for adoption, she went for adoption and that adoption placement failed, she came back to us in February with [foster child] still here.” *Participant F7* |
| Reference to a ‘normal’ | N/A | Throughout the interviews there were often references made to their being a ‘normal’. This was often in relation to their new home set up being ‘normal’, or that the child’s behaviour deviated from the ‘norm’, or finally that they needed to be parented differently to how one might ‘normally’ parent. | “whether or not he’ll ever get back to so-called normal I don’t know.” *Participant F1*  “parenting her in a totally different way in a therapeutic way rather than just a normal kind of parenting way.” *Participant F4*  “So we did the whole bedtime routine, of y’know like normal, you have dinner, you then go up and you have a bath, you have stories” *Participant F7* |

VERSION 2

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| **Theme** | **Subtheme** | **Description** | **Quotes** |
| Improvements Over Time | ‘Then’ Descriptions | Almost all FCs at some point made reference to how the child was when they first arrived. For some this was as detailed as the physical description of the child, and their response upon arriving at the FC’s house. Whilst for others it referred more to the traits and behaviours seen shortly after they arrived. | “His head was down, he used to look at you through sort of eyes that were almost closed, and he seemed to be in like a bit of a rage. You could tell he wasn’t well looked after, his skin was in a terrible state very rough, very cracked. He was itching all over, bleeding in fact where he was scratching.” *Participant F1*  “When he came, he was six, but it was like looking after an 18-month year old. He was, he could speak but it was very difficult to understand what he was saying, he had very little, he was very volatile, very, very unable to regulate his emotion. He was a hypervigilant, he was scared the whole time, and would run about touching the walls, everything, very very little eye contact, very little sort of engagement really. Would go off with anybody, very little idea that there was any, who he was. And a high level of sexualised behaviour. He was exhibiting a high level of sexualised behaviour, and, verbally and in his actions, mostly towards towards me, not towards my husband towards me. That was how he was when he came. He needed absolutely 24 hours almost, he was awake a lot of the night, he had a lot of bad dreams, he was awake a lot. Found it very difficult to go to sleep wouldn’t sleep til about 10 11 at night, was screaming around upstairs, awake several times in the night scared. And so, it was extremely intense to and to to, that’s how he was when he arrived.” *Participant F7* |
| Improvements Over time | Almost all FC made reference at some point to the changes that they had seen over time in the child. These changes were often in their behaviours, but also in relation to their building of attachments. The changes described were also often caveated with the notion that they were still challenging. | “And you think actually, from, this is taking hours, to where you are has been an absolutely incredible journey.” *Participant F5*  “so it its exhausting, and actually what we did notice though, was as he settled and as he became more regulated and more attached to us actually he would be able to separate a bit, because he became more aware of who he was and actually he could see us as separate people and he could just be on his own for a bit” *Participant F7*  “But he was, he was transformed, absolutely transformed, I mean he’s still challenging and he’s still a long way to go, but actually, y’know he is totally transformed from that.” *Participant F7*  “he’s massively improved. Still room for improvement, but we’re getting there.” *Participant F10* |
| Challenging Behaviour Varied but Intense | Intensity | The type of challenging behaviour described by the FCs was relatively varied and included self-harm, sleeping difficulties, violence, and sexualised behaviours. However, one common theme across the behaviours was the intensity of them, either in terms of time (the persistence of a low-level behaviour), or explosive meltdowns. | “So, the challenging behaviours was the intensity that he required, it was like a baby who needed to be with you all the time, but he is six. So that’s hard work, that’s all through the night, and evenings as well.” *Participant F7*  “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...” *Participant F4*  “It is, but it’s not uncommon which I think makes it harder, because of the consistency of it, I think if that sort of thing happened once a month it would be like woah ok, this is, I’ve done something here that’s not working. Today was a bad day kind of thing, but its, it can happen 3 or 4 times in a day she’s like that, she’s so over-stimulated and over-aroused all the time.” *Participant F3* |
| Aggression | One of the most common behaviours described was aggression. This included physical violence directed towards others, verbal aggression, and destruction of property. | “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” *Participant F6*  “it’s nearly bed time, and he just basically screamed at me, and then started punching at me like that. So, I moved away from him and I said to him, [partner] do you want to come and take over here because he’s got quite aggressive.” *Participant F10*  “so hence he would do things to cope with that, his coping mechanism was maybe to go and have a bit of another child at school he would have a bit of a wrestle which he shouldn’t have been doing and maybe he would even hit the child which we got called in a few times about that.” *Participant F9* |
| Jekyll and Hyde | FCs often described the behaviour as unpredictable, like flipping a switch, or exploding. It wasn’t necessarily that they were unaware of what had triggered the behaviour or what was underpinning it, just that the child often changed quickly. | “she’s quite a complex child, and she’s lovely with it, she really lights up a room, she walks in if she’s in a good mood, she walks in and it’s just like someone’s switched a light on. It’s amazing, she’s such a lovely person, and yet when she’s in a bad mood or she’s struggling with something, she’s quite the opposite. She walks in and it’s like someone’s shut the curtains. Like a sink hole. So, yeah, she’s quite difficult to balance and judge in that way, but she’s adorable.” *Participant F3*  “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” *Participant F6*  “And then she would flip, often without an obvious trigger and we’d be like, “oh my goodness, where’s this come from?”” *Participant F4* |
| Explanations of Challenging Behaviour | Behaviour not chosen | FCs often made reference to the fact that the behaviour isn’t a choice, and that the child is not naughty. There were also references made to children’s diagnoses and whether this might be a reason for the behaviours. | “I knew that there was going to be a reason to it, there’s always like logic in the chaos” *Participant F3*  “he settles in quicker now than he did before, but I still think his challenging behaviour is more to do with his ASD than being naughty, being a naughty child, because when he’s yeah. He’s incredibly good. He wants to help” *Participant F10*  “It’s not a case of the child being naughty, it’s the child expressing an issue” *Participant F6* |
| Reason for Behaviour unknown | This refers to the notion that FCs were sometimes unable to work out what was underpinning the specific behaviour. However, alongside this was also the sentiment expressed in the other sub-themes that the child is not responsible for their behaviour and that it is often underpinned by something bigger from their early experiences. | “these things will still happen and you think, well is it them, part of what they learnt, was it some sort of device they had to gain attention, or a hundred and one different things, a hundred and one different things why these things, sometimes there is a reason, sometimes there is no reason” *Participant F1*  “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” *Participant F5* |
| Result of early experiences | Often when discussing what was underpinning the child’s challenging behaviours, it was often brought back to elements of their previous experiences | “Yeah, and certainly you see how the effect of trauma, how it stopped everything, it just stopped his brain being able to grow because he just had to survive” *Participant F7*  “y’know I totally attribute it to his past experiences. It’s not him, he’s just a little boy, poor little boy” *Participant F7* |
| *Emotional Experiences*  This sub theme encapsulates the idea that some of challenging behaviours stemmed from emotional consequences of their previous home life and experiences. | “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” *Participant F6*    “my impression was he was downed a lot as a child and therefore didn’t think he was up to any good. He would say y’know “I’m not any good, I can’t do anything”. Really really quick “I can’t do it” would come really quickly.” *Participant F8*  “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.” *Participant F4*  “So y’know we would take away the, cause he had difficulty making choice actually, and I think it was because, our understanding was, it didn't matter what he chose he always lost it. Because my understanding from his background would be, he was given loads of toys, but he never got to keep them, they were always sold again I think to provide money. That’s my guess I don’t know that for definite. so he never had anything of his own that he ever kept, so to him, making a choice was really hard, because it was always, what are you going to lose next, in some ways” *Participant F8* |
| *Physical Experiences*  This sub theme refers to the lasting impact that the neglect and abuse had in terms of physical development, but also learnt behaviours. | “So, when he’s doing that to us, at home, I think, actually he is just a little boy and he is just living out this awful stuff that he has seen.” *Participant F7*  “she has several difficulties with learning and social interaction that mostly stems from early neglect.” *Participant F3*  “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”” *Participant F4* |
| *Survival Behaviours*  This refers to behaviours that were considered challenging in the current environment, but would previously have served the function of ensuring safety and survival. | “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” *Participant F4*    “he was hyper, he was hypervigilant – “what’s that?”, and he would notice everything, absolutely everything. Even to the extent he would say, oh you’ve put nail polish on. And I just thought, kids at that age do not notice things like that” *Participant F8*    “so I think that’s the difference that the survival instinct initially was to grow up for her whereas for the other one was to not.” *Participant F3* |
| *Triggers*  The notion that behaviour was triggered was often given as an explanation for the behaviour. Specifically, that it was things that they had experienced in their home life that contributed to the triggers. | “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” *Participant F6*    “When she’s really really struggling, she finds transitions hard, and that’s any transition from, she’s reading a book and you say “it’s going to be tea time in 5 minutes you need to come and set the table please while I plate up” that means that she has to leave the book, move rooms, change activity, that’s too much for her to process, on a bad day that will result in a meltdown.” *Participant F3* |
| Behaviour Management | Being Consistent | This was often a preemptive approach that consisted of structure, stability, consistency in responses from the FCs and the FCs being a realisable and available adult for the children. | “She always knew that she could rely on me. She knew I’d be there at the school gate.” *Participant F6*  “we sort of regulated his day first of all, so we had very very clear routines, food, of eating of mealtimes of what happened in the day, to try and regulate his body really.” *Participant F7* |
| Being Adaptive | Alongside a need for consistency in response, was also the notion that different children needed different things from the adults around them, and therefore you had to adapt your response according to the specific child, and/or the specific situation. | “we have very different parenting skills depending on the children in our care, so we’re very adaptive, it’s not a one shoe fits all kind of household and I think you have to be like that to be a good foster carer” *Participant F3*    “you had to try and gauge the situation very quickly and then temper it with how you would deal with it” *Participant F1*  “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.” *Participant F4* |
| Pre-empting issues | This referred to FCs getting to know their children, learn their triggers and what behaviours indicated that they were escalating, this meant they were able to put strategies in place before there was a bigger meltdown. | “and even with his behaviour if he was y’know playing with his toys and things like that, if he was getting fed up with one or starting to get, y’know starting to run around and you could just see that the energy levels were getting too high, it would be a case of “right we’re going to play with two toys, which two is it going to be” and the rest would get put away and then.” *Participant F8*  “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” *Participant F6*  “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” *Participant F5* |
| Providing safety, security and love | The FCs often made reference to the impact that being in a different environment had on the children’s behaviour – for the better. The sense that being in a home in which their psychological needs was a reason why they saw less behaviours over time. | “But yeah, we just kind of went with it and answered his questions because we felt that was the best way to help him to feel more secure.” *Participant F8*    “removal from the abuse and the neglect. And giving him, nurturing, clear, consistent, warm, caring, very very controlled environment, safety, warmth, predictable” *Participant F7*  “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.” *Participant F5* |
| Teaching new skills | Often the FCs mentioned new skills that they were teaching the children they cared for which contributed to a reduction in the challenging behaviours they were seeing. The types of skills taught ranged from emotional literacy to table manners. | “He’s got table manners now, when he came to us he’d just scoff his food like that, he’d just sit on the chair like this with his leg hanging down and just...I had to teach him to sit at the table, had to teach him to eat with a knife and fork, y’know, going back to basics when you have a child, and it was about, when you ask for something please and thank you, not I want or give me” *Participant F10*  “Never be cross, just say to him, we really understand that he’s got some really big feelings going on about that, and that’s his body trying to tell us because he can’t use his words to tell us what’s gone on so his body is telling us and it would be lovely if he could use his words or he could write it down that would be great, but if he can’t that’s ok because his body’s doing the job, but as he gets older he might be able to do that, and we just clear it up and it’s no big deal.” *Participant F2*  “we spent hours with him just playing games, helping him to win helping him to lose, showing him how to lose gracefully, and that sort of thing I mean these things are not over night, they don’t happen overnight.” *Participant F8* |
| Drawing on knowledge and training | FC often made reference to the training that they had received, and to specific concepts that they would only be aware of through additional research and training into support looked after children. | “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.” *Participant F6*  “My parenting with her is still that consistent sort of pace parenting” *Participant F3* |
| *Therapeutic parenting*  This was the area of further knowledge and training that was mentioned most consistently across the foster carers. Some mentioned therapeutic parenting by name, whilst others described therapeutic approaches, or therapeutic parenting techniques such as ‘time-in’. | “If, and the other thing, the other thing that I was very much aware of was as a parent I always used to feel that and it was reinforced in some of the training that we got is, especially with therapeutic parenting, they need to know that you know exactly what’s going on and you’re in control.” *Participant F8*  “very sort of therapeutic parenting, of understanding that this is a traumatised child, that you cannot, it’s not the way of parenting another 9 year old, you have to parent differently.” *Participant F7* |
| Impact for foster carers | Emotional Impact | There were many different elements of the fostering process that created an emotional impact on the FCs, ranging from the emotional impact of the challenging behaviour, to the emotions associated with the child’s background and being in the care system. | “And I mean y’know being a, the foster caring it is difficult because we’re dealing with all this y’know for the first year he was having contact with his parents, and I would y’know I knew them and I saw them, and that's hard, that’s hard” *Participant F7*  “But it actually, he was very challenging the first six months, and we really struggled a lot. And I found it really exhausting” *Participant F10*  “And she went “I DON’T CARE I HATE YOU” and then moved her arm out and started biting her hand, erm, and then, ran out of the room and upstairs and was jumping in her room and throwing things around and banging about, erm. Yeah and I just sort of cleared a space on this sofa and sat down and felt very defeated by the whole thing” *Participant F3* |
| Isolating | FCs talked about feeling isolated, often because of other’s perceptions of the child’s challenging behaviour, or family and friends not understanding the behaviour management approaches undertaken by the foster carers. | “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.” *Participant F6*  “yeah that struck me just how, how isolated you can become, I mean we didn’t go that many places, and I remember saying all throughout that placement, which was over a year, y’know how isolated we were.” *Participant F8*  “and he’ll throw things or he’ll break things which is funny because if you sat and met him nobody would believe that, nobody would believe that they would say oh he’s really sweet. And he is, but he’s got this, he’s got an inner rage, they’ve both got an inner rage.” *Participant F2* |
| Lack of information regarding child’s background. | One element in particular that was highlighted was the dearth of information given to FCs about the child that they are going to, and now are, looking after. | “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” *Participant F4*  “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” *Participant F6* |
| Positive reflections | Despite all the challenges and the emotional impact of being a foster carer, there were many positive reflections made. | “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.” *Participant F6*  “And all that, when you see that that’s when you realise, “cor you did an amazing job”” *Participant F6* |
| *Positive Characteristics*  FCs often described the child using positive characteristics. For some, this was in response to the question “can you describe the child?”, whilst for others the characteristics were dropped in later in the conversation, almost in response to a discussion focused so heavily on challenging behaviour. | “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.” *Participant F5*  “He was always friendly, chatty, smiley, loved going out” *Participant F7*  “He’s a lovely character, he’s bubbly, he’s got a lot of energy, very friendly, very interested in certain things” *Participant F1* |
| *Delighting in Progress*  Many of the FCs took pride in the progress that the children had made, and you could sense a delight in sharing these positive reflections. | “To the point where yes, we rejoiced when he would sometimes just run upstairs to get something on his own, y'know being able to do that was a huge step for him, huge step for him” *Participant F7*  “you know we’ve really reclaimed that childhood for her which I’m quite proud of doing to be honest because it’s a very difficult thing to do when you get someone that precocious” *Participant F3*  “And you think actually, from, this is taking hours, to where you are has been an absolutely incredible journey” *Participant F5* |
| *Hopes for the future*  FCs often made reference to the progress children had made so far and that they had confidence they would now be ‘ok’. | “I mean because my background in the psycho- in the therapy stuff it was like living it all the time, and actually seeing all this stuff that you’d read in textbooks, actually happening to this child and seeing the effect of nurturing, consistent, warm, safe care environment from 2, my husband was very much a part of this, from 2 y’know, I mean we’re not perfect there were times where we got it wrong but within a framework of this is just fine consistent normal caring stuff, and helping him to regulate himself, the difference that this made to his childhood and you could almost see his brain growing and the pathways coming, it was just amazing to watch really, and seeing who he is now and where, I mean he has a chance now, he has a chance now to live a life.” *Participant F7*  “Now, if he can say that and know what that means, which he does know what that means, he can then have life can’t he? He knows what the boundaries are. He knows what happened, he knows what shouldn’t happen, he can do that, that was just enormous actually, and him verbalising that to us.” *Participant F7*    “That’s why I said he was just classic, classic traumatised child [laughs]. But, y’know, there’s hope. There is hope.” *Participant F8*  “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” *Participant F5* |
| Consequences of child’s early experiences | Impact on Education | The child’s educational progress was often commented mostly in reference to the child not having previously been in an emotional state conducive to learning and were therefore not working at their age level. | “unfortunately because of all the environmental reasons he was very behind he’s erm, he’s had a cognitive assessment and everything is bang where it should be but he really is struggling at school catching up.” *Participant F2*  “he is not stupid, he’s he’s learnt, so any sort of academic stuff had stopped though so school was prfff, y’know, but, and it took a year and half for him to be able to start to learn, and this last year he has started to read. So he’s 9, so he’s way behind, and I don’t know if he’ll ever catch up” *Participant F7*  “He was really clever, really clever young lad, but had never been in an emotional place to learn, so he was quite behind at school, and as he settled, you could see the educational side of him catching up. Actually, the news we’ve had from his foster, his adoptive parents is that he now is working at his age level” *Participant F8* |
| Negative consequences of challenging behaviour for child | There were many comments made in relation to consequences of the challenging behaviour of the child, including access to activities and longevity of placements. | “so I put his name down and then he didn’t have a place and you think oh well maybe next year, put his name down again, got a place, lovely. When it came to filing in all the paperwork and they realised that he had additional needs, all of a sudden his place disappeared and he didn’t have a place.” *Participant F2*  “but so extreme behaviour, and this lad in the end, he wasn’t with us long, he had to go to not even another family he had to go to one of these units for very damaged children, which I think he’s still at” *Participant F1*  “but the carers that he was with although they were experienced carers, found his behaviour very difficult and too challenging, and then he came to us” *Participant F7* |
| Re-living experiences | This sub theme encompasses all the factors associated with being a looked after child that lead to you reliving your past experiences. For example, ongoing disclosures, contact, unanswered questions. | “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.” *Participant F5*  “One of the hard things – at that particular point we were able to be more specific, but one of the hard things in fostering is there are no definites, so you can’t make any promises to the kids and say that, oh this will happen or that will happen, because half the time, you don’t know yourself, and that as an adult is really frustrating and difficult to work with, so as a child, I really get how they must be totally freaked out by it.” *Participant F8*  “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” *Participant F6* |
| Changes of placement | By the nature of talking to FCs, all the children they had worked with had experienced at least one move from home to a foster placement. However, one sub theme was the ongoing changes of placement between carers and family members that many children experienced. | “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” *Participant F5*  *“*But then actually what happened was, his sister went for adoption, about this time last year, well September last, September ’18, because she was going for adoption, she went for adoption and that adoption placement failed, she came back to us in February with [foster child] still here.” *Participant F7* |
| Reference to a ‘normal’ | N/A | Throughout the interviews there were often references made to their being a ‘normal’. This was often in relation to their new home set up being ‘normal’, or that the child’s behaviour deviated from the ‘norm’, or finally that they needed to be parented differently to how one might ‘normally’ parent. | “whether or not he’ll ever get back to so-called normal I don’t know.” *Participant F1*  “parenting her in a totally different way in a therapeutic way rather than just a normal kind of parenting way.” *Participant F4*  “So we did the whole bedtime routine, of y’know like normal, you have dinner, you then go up and you have a bath, you have stories” *Participant F7* |