Facilitating peer support between foster carers in the UK: An overview of three studies

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Some context setting

- Around 75% of children in out of home care in England are placed in foster care
- Long term foster care recognised as a suitable option for some children
- The local authority as the ‘corporate parent’
- Delegated authority
- Recruitment and retention rates of foster carers
  - Improving the capacity of foster care
Different avenues for peer support

• Peer mentoring or one to one support
• Groups
  • Coffee mornings
  • Support groups
  • Local Foster Carer Associations
• Online peer support
  • Facebook
  • Online forums
What does the literature tell us?

• “Supporting Each Other: An International Literature Review on Peer Contact Between Foster Carers”, Luke and Sebba, 2013

• Peer support can fulfil a number of support needs
  • Shared learning, advice and information
  • Emotional support and shared understanding
  • Appraising and reflecting on practice

• Some links to foster carer retention
  • Strain

• Less positive aspects:
  • Gossip
  • Negative conversations about social workers or fostering service
The studies

- London Fostering Achievement
  - Mayor of London’s Schools Excellence Fund
  - Aimed to improve the ability of carers and teachers to raise the educational outcomes of children in the care
  - ‘Education Champions’
  - ‘Hard to reach’ carers

- Head, Heart, Hands
  - Introduce social pedagogy into UK foster care
  - Underpinning principle of co-creation and equality of practice
  - Shared learning and practice groups
The studies

- Made to Measure
  - Families with children with disabilities
  - ‘Pooling’ personal budgets
  - Parent led commissioning through peer relationships
  - Online forum

- The Mockingbird Family Model
  - Constellations supported by a hub home
  - Due to report Summer 2016
Key findings: Peer Mentoring

• Undertook a range of activities
  • Development of tools and training materials
  • Trips with an educational element
  • Awareness raising
  • Guidance and advice on key issues
  • One to one support
• Key source of information and empowerment
  • Pupil Premium Plus
  • Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings
• Improved access to services for the children
Key findings: Peer Mentoring

• Very well regarded
  • Foster carers and Children’s Services staff
• ‘Someone who understands’
  • Provision of advice that works
  • Sympathetic rather than judgemental support
  • Focussed on strengths rather than difficulties
• Took time to establish
  • Engagement with Education and Social Care Staff
  • Very few referrals
• Access through groups
  • Reaching the hard to reach?
Groups

- Groups run by foster carers are generally well regarded
- Open non-judgemental environment
- Sharing experiences and advice
  - What works
- Attendance problematic
  - Low numbers
  - Practicalities
Online support

• Alternative and convenient space for carers or parents
• Limited uptake
  • Generally a source of information rather than dialogue
  • Discussions primarily initiated by the staff
  • Clarity about their use
• Low use of online services
  • Less convenient than initially anticipated
  • Use of Facebook and other social media platforms
• Gap in the evidence identified by Luke and Sebba, 2013
The challenges

• Accessing peer support
• Avoidance of the virtuous circle
• The limits of confidentiality
• Interface with the wider system
  • The corporate parent vs delegated authority
Questions for consideration

- What might facilitate more foster carers making use of peer support?
  - What are some of the practical steps that might be necessary?
- What models are available that have been found to be effected in other countries?
  - What models have been found to be ineffective?
- How can the interface between foster carers and the wider system be improved to facilitate peer support?
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