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

Sam McDermid
Research Fellow
Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University
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?
Sam McDermid
Research Fellow, Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University
S.Mcdermid@lboro.ac.uk
+441509 228 365
www.c CFR.org.uk
Twitter: @CCFR_SMcdermid