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## Part of the Family: Achieving Permanence in Long-Term Family Foster Care

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Authors	Beek, Mary;Pavao, Joyce Maguire
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# Part of the family: achieving permanence in long-term family foster care

Dr Mary Beek

Professor Gillian Schofield

# Outline of the session

- Policy, practice and research context for permanence and long-term foster care (LTFC)
- Findings from research for understanding and developing long-term foster care
- Perspectives of long-term foster children and foster carers

# Long-term foster care and permanence – international policy differences and debates

- **USA and Canada** – lack of trust in LTFC and a strong preference / drive to achieve adoption
- **UK** – value adoption BUT also developing new policy /practices to establish LTFC more effectively
- **Scandinavia** –Birth family rights: LTFC is accepted but adoption now being considered in Norway /Finland
- **France, Italy, Spain** – Focus on birth family – kinship care /residential care – limited LTFC in Spain
- **Australia** – Permanent foster care - but now some reconsideration of adoption

# UK official definition of permanence 2010

- **Permanence** is the framework of emotional permanence (attachment), physical permanence (stability) and legal permanence (the carer has parental responsibility for the child) which gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond
- **NB** Emphasis on '**Legal permanence**' appears to exclude long-term foster care

# UK official definition of permanence - 2015

- Revised to include long-term foster care
- Permanence **does not** require caregivers to have legal parental responsibility

# UK – issues for long-term foster care as a permanence option over past 20 years

- Long Term Foster Care - the 'Cinderella' option?
- Can true permanence be achieved within the care system?
- Concerns about outcomes – stability and development

# Relevant research at UEA 1997-2016

- *Part of the Family* - 40 adults who grew up in foster care (1998-2001)
- *Growing up in Foster Care* - 52 children in LTFC (1997 - 2006)
- *Permanence in Foster Care* – LTFC procedures (2006 - 7)
- *Parents of children growing up in foster care* (2008 - 9)
- *Care planning for permanence in foster care* (2008 - 10)
- *Looked after Children and Offending* (2010-12)
- *Care planning and the IRO* (2012 - 14)
- *Supporting long-term foster care* (2015 - 16)

# Growing up in Foster Care

(Schofield and Beek 1997 – 2006)

- 52 planned long-term placements, tracked over 9 years
- 30 (58%) stable
- 10 (19%) stable in second placements

THUS 76% stable and functioning reasonably well (e.g. peers, education, employment)

NB

- **Secure base relationships** in foster family were key to success
- These were LTFC placements **planned as permanent**

# Belonging and permanence

(Biehal et al 2010)

- Comparison of different routes to permanence
- Disruption rates lower for adoption (13% v 28%).  
BUT LT fostered children older when placed  
(4.1yrs v 2.9yrs)
- Children in *stable* long-term foster placements had similar educational, emotional and behavioural outcomes to those who were adopted
- Also stable foster children had a strong sense of belonging and permanence

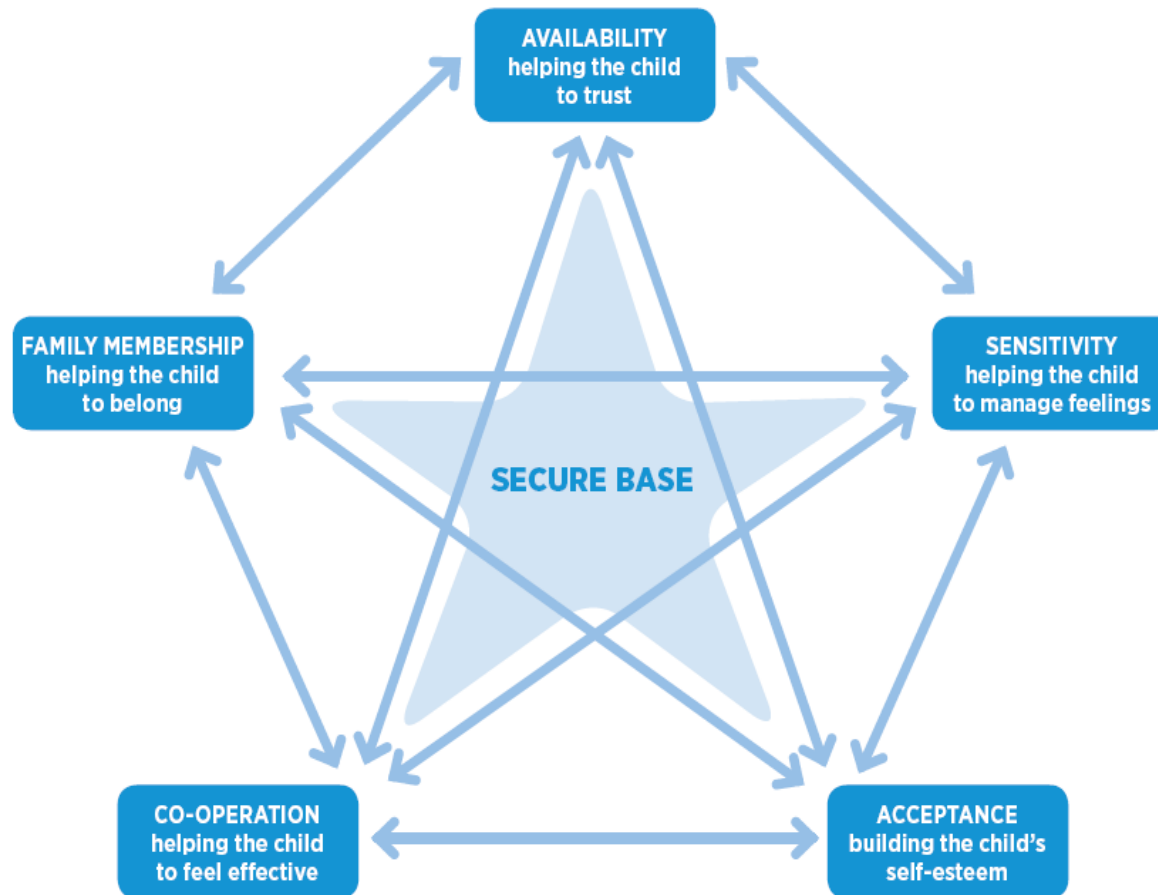
# Current UK issues for LTFC as permanence

- All children in care, including adolescents, are required to have a care plan for permanence
- Long-term foster care is an option
- Local authorities must have formal procedures for assessment, matching and support for LTFC
- Potential for more flexibility regarding level of statutory involvement (visiting, reviews etc)

# Key ideas from UEA research on long-term foster care

- The value of the Secure Base model
- Foster and birth family membership
- Foster carers as skilled professionals and committed parents
- The role of professionals in supporting long-term foster care

# The Secure Base model



# Foster family membership

- Full inclusion as part of the family
- Into adulthood
- A 'normal' family life

# Foster family membership- what it means to a young person in long-term foster care

- It is - just ordinary things. We don't do anything out of the ordinary. We are normal people. We are a normal family. Just because there is the word 'foster' in front of it doesn't mean anything. Yeah you know there is a back story- the foster part of it is the back story- but other than that we are just a normal family. You know I get taken to things like friend's weddings and birthday parties, and it's lovely.

# Permanence / foster family membership – what it means to a long-term foster carer

- In my mind permanence is a word that means a lot. It means that Marie is never going to leave, not when she's 18, 19, 20 or whatever. If she goes to university, not when she's 25. She's always going to be part of our family. I am sure when she's 36 and has got her own children, she will be bringing them to us, I will probably be looking after them. We are always going to be her Mama and Papa.

# Carer bonding / commitment - important to children of all ages

- Carer's commitment to this child that will endure
- Child is special, unique, treasured, valued
- Feelings may occur for a child of any age
- Feelings may be there at the beginning or develop over time

# Bonding with a long-term foster child

- Well I remember it was June and quite a hot day and she came walking down the path with thick tights on. I think she had been determined to put these colourful thick tights on, a little dark haired girl, coming to the door with the social worker, needing protecting, you know, she was lovely.

(Foster carer recalling Sacha's arrival in the foster family- age 6, now 12)

# Young person's sense of birth - rebirth in the foster family

- Because of my age and my parents' marriage and everything it fits in almost exactly that I am almost their actual daughter. My dad and I have a little joke every now and again, I say 'Dad do you feel glad that you skipped the pregnancy part?' and he goes 'Oh yes I am glad I skipped that bit!'

(Rosie 14, placed at 11)

# Birth family membership

- Birth family respected
- Realistic appraisal of birth family strengths and difficulties
- Foster carers support young person to value and sustain positive links with birth family

# Foster **and** birth family membership

My foster family have given me opportunities that I would have never been able to have and it is really lovely how much they are there for me. You know, because I am not with my family, they sort of fill that space, but never replace. They wouldn't, they are respectful, they know how much I love my family, they know that I care so much equally about all of them and that I could never choose between them'.

(Young person, age14, in long-term foster care)

# Professional foster carer and / or committed parent?

- For foster carers, their family is work and work is family – roles are not clearly separated and boundaries are not clearly defined.
- How do they manage different and potentially contradictory role identities?

# Skilled professionals *and* committed parents

- Long-term foster placements can be successful where carers have different primary role identities
- Primary identity as foster carers, but *also* accept the role of parent
- Primary identity as parents, but *also* accept the role of carer

# Professional carers who accept role of parent

- Enjoy professional role and partnership with social workers
- Value training
- Respect child's care status
- Support birth *and* foster family identity

## AND

- Committed to the child as a family member
- See child as part of foster family into adulthood

# Professional carer who also accepts role of committed parent

I run the support network, I'm chair of the Carers' Association and I run the helpline. But when it comes to a review, I am there solely to be her mother. You've probably got about 15 professionals involved. She doesn't need me talking jargon and being a professional because everyone else does that. I am just there to be her Mum, first and foremost, I am her Mum.

(Long term foster carer of Marie (15, placed at 11))

# Committed parents who accept the role of carer

- Motivated to build a family
- Emphasise normalising the child's experience
- Use their own family and friends as support systems

## AND

- Understand their role as carers on behalf of local authority
- Like to know the 'system' /support is there for them and the child

# Committed parent who also accepts role of carer

We made a conscious decision not to ask for respite – because she needs to become part of our family. But I wouldn't be without the social workers...because they understand the difference between being a 'carer' and being a 'parent' which your family doesn't understand...and I'll do quite a lot of training courses.

(Foster carer of Rosie, 14, placed at 11)

# Risks of being exclusively 'carers' or exclusively 'parents'

- Carers who may accept a child as a long-term placement **BUT** do not take on the parenting e.g. may not fully include child in family, may anticipate the child moving out of the family at 18 or before.
- Carers who see themselves as parents **BUT** reject carer identity. May not accept the need for training, do not help the child manage care identity, may form alliance with child against 'the system'.

# Exclusively parents: role disappointment

- I imagined that once we got to the end of the paid period that she would be part of our family and she would just continue being here. The reality is that I don't think that will happen.

# The role of professionals: what do long-term foster carers value?

- Consistent, available, reliable support
- A reflective space
- Challenge – and positive feedback
- Part of the team

# The role of professionals: what do long-term foster carers value?

- It is a bit of everything. She understands where I am coming from, it is not rushed when she visits, and she is part of the family. We all feel comfortable to talk to her. She attends all my meetings, she is just there, you know.
- I will ring her 'I've done this or that' And she will just have a different angle on it and I will go, 'Yeah actually' or I will just go, 'Do I sound really hard?' 'Or am too soft?' And it is like a sounding board and you think that actually I am doing OK.

# The role of social workers for young people

- Some feel a specific need for regular involvement with a social worker
- Others feel that they do not need a social worker – but value connection with birth family, access to resources
- A flexible approach?

(Beek et al, 2016)

# Needing and not needing a social worker

- You may not think about it directly but sub-consciously you think 'I've got a social worker, and things are going to be alright, someone is looking out for me, other than the people I live with'.

[Young person (14) in LTFC]

- I don't need them. Not at all. Because this is my family. I don't mind them, because they have to do it, it's their job. But if they don't turn up then I'm not really bothered.

[Young person (17) in LTFC]

# What do young people value in their social workers?

- Consistency
- Reliability
- Listening
- Personal interest
- Mix of talking/activities/outings at comfortable level for the individual

# What does your social worker say and do that is helpful for you?

- She talks to me and she always put in the extra time....when I went through a bad patch...she would come and talk with me and I love that bit where they talk with you, but don't try and be your friend, they just talk with you. And they write it down and they say 'this is how things are' and then they bring you into it and help you understand it. And it was just that sort of way that you can't describe, but it works.

(Young person (14) in long-term foster care)

# Successful long-term foster care

*What does being in foster care means to you?*

It means a lot to me, it makes me feel like I am in a proper family, I feel very safe and very comfortable and loved... I am happy that I came here and I just wish that I came earlier.

(Young person (13) in long-term foster care)

# Long-term foster care

- Questions and discussion