

OpenLearn documentary:
What foster carers want you to know

JO STRANG: My name is Jo Strang and I'm a lecturer at The Open University. I'm also qualified as a children's family social worker and for about 15 years I was involved in assessing applicants to become foster carers. So I know that the role of a foster carer can be quite difficult to explain and that was why I was keen to be involved in this project and particularly in helping foster carers to have their voices heard and to explain some of the challenges and some of the positives about being a foster carer.

So what does it look and feel like from your role as a foster carer if you've got a good social worker,?

FOSTER CARER 1: I suppose the good social worker and the, and the good rapport and getting on with them it's all, you know, part and parcel. With a good social worker you're kind of singing from the same hymn sheet. You're you both, you know, obviously want what's best for the boys and they will work with you like not against you and also, you know, able to fight your corner.

If they don't agree with something that you know, they're being told to do, then they will quite happily go back and say, well, actually, you know, I don't think this is right and I agree with the foster parents.

JO STRANG: What are some of the challenges that you experience in being a foster carer?

FOSTER CARER 2: Sometimes we have professionals coming in that don't always realise it's our home and they think it's like an office. It's almost like an automatic thing of decisions are made without sometimes the input from the foster carer.

FOSTER CARER 3: Sometimes a bit of a lack of communication between some health professionals or social services in particular, because especially when around decisions made about children and the fact that you're not consulted in making those decisions, you know, so it's frustration and you're kind of under pressure to try and make something happen and you can't. And you're trying to make everyone happy and do everything that you need to do. But it, the decisions were made and not changed. That's one of the things that it's very difficult to change this is in some sense.

FOSTER CARER 4: I'd say sometimes the social workers could take into account more of the foster carers opinion about the onward care of the child. I mean, there are times – there was a child I had as a foster child and he was just like another son to me. When he left to go and live with his parent, I mean I did say maybe he shouldn't go because, you know, maybe wasn't the right environment. They still moved him. And then a year later, literally almost exactly what I said would happen had happened. And when he heard that there was a possibility he might come back to be fostered by me, he turned up at my door. I was his rock and he was coming back to his rock, you know.

And sometimes you don't always get enough background on a child to do an effective job. One child that came to me had almost a very little history. So, he actually needed a lot more external intervention than we first thought. And they weren't prepared to make other arrangements or until they'd finished what they wanted to do. And we had to. the agency supporting me, had to fight tooth and nail to have him removed and relocated because he was putting everybody in danger. He needed a kind of care that wasn't going to be available from me. Eventually he was moved and I've heard that since he's been there, he's actually changed for the better.

The local authority weren't listening to what I was saying. This child needs something that I can't give him.

FOSTER CARER 1: So we had a social worker that was, in my opinion, just, you know, damn right rude. I mean, it was just obvious that she was ignoring me. Another time she came round

and asked where the boys were. I said upstairs, I said, I'll just call them for you. And she'd already made her way up the stairs. So it's almost, I almost felt like saying to her, you know, you're using my house like your workplace, but actually this is our home and you should respect that. At least say hello and rather than, you know, take it upon yourself to just take yourself off upstairs.

FOSTER CARER 5: The team around the child is not always pulling in the same direction and trying to get meetings together when everybody's available to try and resolve these issues. The challenge is when you have, for instance, a new social worker who doesn't have experience, specifically don't have any experience with kids with needs and decisions get made without your knowledge that then caused such a massive ripple effect that she ended up having to leave here after all that time. And we'd got her through school, got her into a really good college where she was doing really well and the people were amazing. She came in, she went in under ASD school. One of the social workers decided that they was going to change the transport. They was now not giving her any transport and they said we needed to look for a new college.

They clearly hadn't read all the emails that I'd sent saying she needs to be in your SEND department because she can't be in mainstream. And it just all went very, very wrong.

JO STRANG: If you could make some small or perhaps bigger changes, what would you like to see that would perhaps better help support you as a foster carer?

FOSTER CARER 4: Social work or any sort of professionals coming to realise that we are a key part of the team. We are with a child 24/7. We don't finish work at 5:00. So it's almost like if the professionals have a bigger view of not just the child, but the child in the placement and what the placement consists of. It's, you know, the family

FOSTER CARER 5: Include us. Let's have a conversation first before that decision is made. I'm the voice for the child. How would I feel if someone was making these decisions about me for my future or on my life and either I can't be heard because I have a diagnosis as a special needs, then the person that's going to speak for me needs to be heard on my behalf and that doesn't happen.

FOSTER CARER 3: As I say, it's mostly about communication. I know there's certain decisions that you can't be involved in, but any decisions that involve directly the home situation, actually what happens within the home. At the end of the day, it's our life as well. It's our family, it's our home, it's our routine. You know, like we're a normal family that happens to look after another child that's part of your family for as long as they're with you. They're your family.

JO STRANG: What do you hope that anybody watching this short film might take from watching it?

FOSTER CARER 2: Just a bit of time to reflect on the impact on the foster carers, and not just the foster carers, but also the foster carers family.

FOSTER CARER 3: They have to respect that your home is your workplace, but it is our home. It's not an office.

FOSTER CARER 5: It's really tough for the kids when the social workers are constantly changing. We must have gone through 10 social workers in five years. And that's where the problem comes in because there's no continuity and they don't know the child. And you can come in and you'll spend maybe 2-3 hours with that child over the course of maybe 3 months, you know, and, and you're going to go and make a decision. That's not fair.

FOSTER CARER 1: Treat with us respect, definitely. also be transparent with us. You know, we're obviously very open to them. You know, our lives are an open book. They don't always share background information about the children with us. In some cases it's quite important information, you know, maybe you should have been told at the beginning. For whatever reason, we're not given that information and that would help because obviously these things always come out. So if you know what you're dealing with, then obviously you can prepare for that.

FOSTER CARER 4: Don't just dismiss what a foster carer says. It might have some validation. You might not agree with it, but sometimes agreeing to disagree might be the best option. To

the local authorities actually taking an interest in me because I'm taking an interest in their child. And it would build a sense of community and closeness, connectivity that can only help, can only, you know, bolster the care that the foster carer gives the child. What do you need? Do you need anything? Is everything going OK? Are you having any pitfalls? What's working, or is there anything you wanted changed? Do you have any suggestions? Questions like that.

JO STRANG: Foster carers play a really key role in our society in offering safe and caring family homes for children when they might need them. Today you've had the opportunity to listen to a few foster carers talking about their experiences within the role. We hope that you can hear how important it is that they feel heard, that they feel respected and they feel valued. They often have great insights into the experiences of the children who they're caring for. Thank you for listening today. We hope that by watching it might have raised awareness of the foster carer role and how we can support foster carers to best support the needs of the children who are placed with them.