

Caring for Children with complex emotional and behavioural needs

What do we mean by ‘complex needs’?

- Children/young people who have **more than one** need affecting their emotional, physical and/or social well-being
- These needs interact and compound each other (e.g., impact of a learning disability on other areas of a child’s life)
- Hard to work out what the primary need is. As this is liable to change, regular review is needed
- Often deemed *complex* as adults can be overwhelmed by the child’s needs and how to meet them (*must be even more overwhelming for the child*)
- The majority of children looked after could be described as having *complex emotional and behavioural needs*

What Services need to know:

What are the challenges?

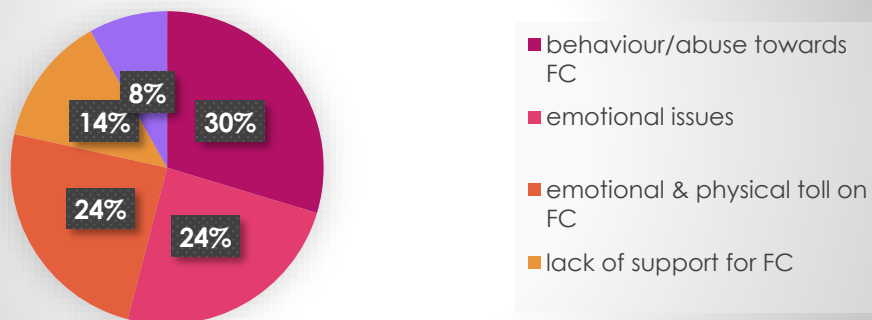
Caring for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs is a demanding task that requires an additional level of parenting. Foster carers therefore need specific and tailored support to help them improve outcomes for these children.

Following consultations with Fostering services across Wales, AFA Cymru found that the main challenges that foster carers face, according to age, are:

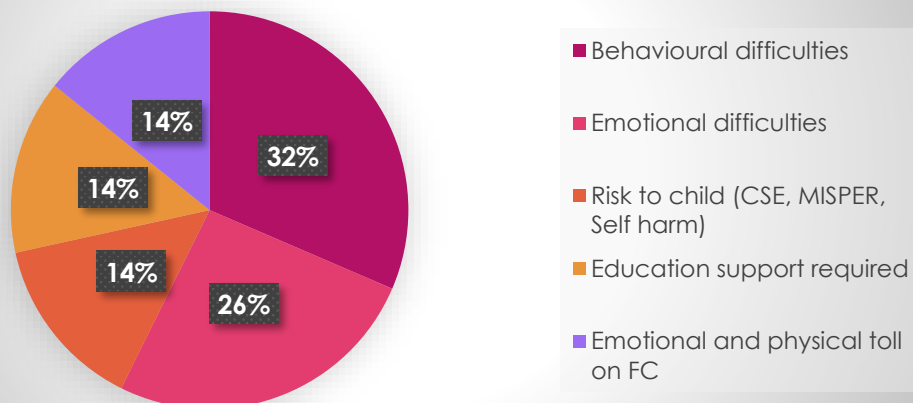
Age 0-4



age 5-11



age 11+



(CSE- child sexual exploitation. MISPER – missing person)

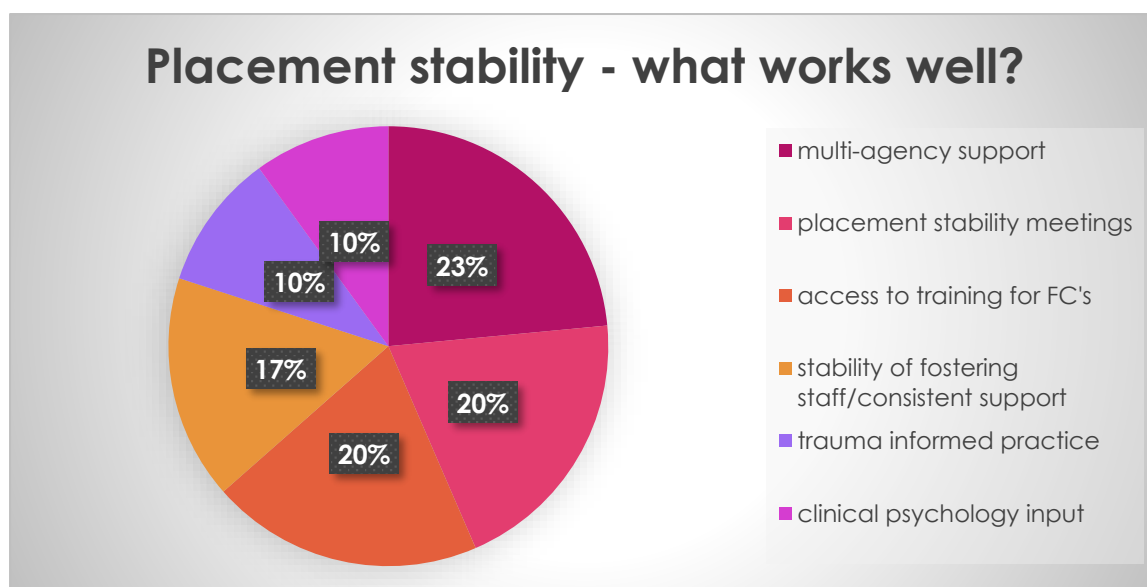
How can they be addressed?

Timely, consistent, emotional and practical support and advice for foster carers to help them meet the needs of children looked after with complex emotional and behavioural needs is essential. This support will increase the stability of placements, which in turn can reduce the complexity of need for this group of children and young people as they are able to recover in a safe, secure, and nurturing home.

For children with complex emotional and behavioural needs where there is likely to be more than one overlapping need, and several agencies involved, effective multi-agency planning and co-working is particularly important.

Fundamental to managing this demanding role is regular learning opportunities which need to be tailored to the needs of the children in placement. These opportunities need to include peer-learning and regular reflection on themselves as foster carers as well as including a focus on how to maximise foster carer well-being.

Psychological input from professionals allows and encourages foster carers to see the world through the lens of the child's internal world. It encourages foster carers to see themselves from the outside and foster children from the inside. This approach to fostering improves empathy, helps build trusting relationships and provides the foundations for a secure attachment to be formed from which a child / young person can start to recover from their early adverse experiences.



(our research showing what works well in terms of placement stability)

What Foster carers need to know:

We deliver a two-day learning opportunity for foster carers, which focusses on **why** developmental trauma can result in children and young people developing complex emotional and behavioural needs, and **how** foster carers can help children to recover, through therapeutic re-parenting.

Why?

Developmental Trauma

Developmental trauma is common in children who have been neglected or abused within their birth family but can be caused by a range of adverse experiences. 'Developmental trauma is the term used to describe the impact of early, repeated abuse, neglect, separation and adverse experiences that happens within the child's important relationships.' (Beacon House)

Neuroscience tells us that toxic stress (strong, frequent, and prolonged adversity) affects brain development and that this can happen in utero.

Impact of Developmental Trauma

The impact varies from child to child and will depend on the cumulative effects combined with any pre-disposing factors such as genetics or the impact of a child's temperament for example.

Children who have experienced developmental trauma from toxic stress get stuck in their primitive brain (fight, flight, freeze response) and can display dysregulated emotions and behaviour. Even when in a safe environment traumatised children's brains are hardwired to survival mode which can result in hyperarousal (hyper vigilant/disassociated).

A foster carers' job is to help create the environment where children can gradually learn that it is safe to switch out of their primitive brain – so other areas of their brain can have time to develop. This can and does happen through a loving, consistent, predictable and committed relationship. This does take time to achieve and there should be no expectation that this will be achieved quickly. Regular reviews of progress are recommended to keep foster carers focused on how small changes are actually big wins.

Life Journey Work

The importance of helping children and young people to understand what has happened to them and why they might have difficulties cannot be underestimated. A fundamental part of a foster carers' role is to help children understand their story in a sensitive, timely and age-appropriate way.

Without a plausible, honest and child friendly version of events, a child can internalise blame which in turn can negatively affect their identity, sense of self and re-enforce messages that they are unlovable or unmanageable.

If children and young people are helped to understand their story and why they may dysregulate (flip their lid) this can be a helpful step in helping children and young people to gain some explanation about their behaviour (name it to tame it) which can help reduce any shame that may be attached to those behaviours, often over which they have no control.

See: [Life Journey Work Guide-for-Foster-carers](#)

How?

These tools and frameworks are ways to help foster carers to think about how their behaviour can impact on and positively effect children and young people with the aim of building a relationship which can then be used as a vehicle to facilitate the child or young person's recovery.

Mentalization

“seeing yourself from the outside and them from the inside”

(Dr P Fonagy)

Mentalization is the ability to think about thinking. It is the process by which we anticipate what the other person's reasons might be for doing something, by putting ourselves into their shoes, whilst at the same time reflecting back to them what we think and feel about their behaviour.

What we think of ourselves is born from what we were thought about in the minds of the people that cared for us. This is called an internal working model and describes the way that we internalize messages about ourselves from the world around us. This reflective awareness can assist foster carers in being mind-minded with the children they are caring for and can help facilitate empathetic and compassionate relationships.

See <https://www.annafreud.org/research-and-policy/research-policy/research-themes/postgraduate-research/doctoral-projects/the-development-and-implementation-of-a-mentalizing-intervention-for-foster-parents/>

Secure Base

The Secure Base model provides a positive framework for therapeutic caregiving which helps infants, children and young people to move towards greater security and builds resilience. It is a model designed to help build positive attachments with children who cannot remain in their birth families. It is developed from attachment theory and suggests practical ways in which carers can help children to trust (availability), manage their feelings (sensitivity), build the child's self-esteem (acceptance), help the child to feel effective (co-operation) and help the child belong (family membership).

See <https://sites.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/the-secure-base-model>

PACE Parenting

This is part of DDP (dyadic developmental psychotherapy) which is a treatment based on attachment to help traumatised children. PACE stands for - Playful, Accepting, Curious and Empathetic. It is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving in any given moment that diffuses tension and builds connection. It is particularly effective in meeting the needs of children and young people who have experienced trauma. Foster carers are encouraged to use PACEful parenting which can be a very useful tool for diverting and avoiding meltdowns, building emotional literacy and self esteem in children and young people.

See <http://www.danielhughes.org/p.a.c.e..html>

Relationships are the golden thread for children in care (The Care Enquiry 2013) and the best tool a foster carer has is themselves. Children who have complex emotional and behavioural needs can recover through a committed, trusting, nurturing relationship with a foster carer and their family. This process will take time but can be achieved with patience, commitment, resilience and support from professionals and the foster carers own support networks.