

CALL



any time

Despite no longer living together, some foster carers and the children they once looked after want to stay in touch – but that is not always allowed. **Nicola Hill** explores the heartbreak

MANY FOSTER CARERS talk with pride about how children they nurtured to adulthood will often come back to see them. In this touching way, fostering mirrors biological parenting as partners and 'foster' grandchildren are introduced.

But there are gaps on the wall where the photos hang. They are the children who came, often for lengthy periods, but who left, perhaps because of a breakdown in their relationship with their foster carer. A young person may have gone but that does not mean the connection should cease. In fact, continued links may be important for future development.

Erina Naluwaga recalls how she was moved 'for cultural reasons' from a foster carer who had looked after her for six years since she was four. She says her new home was the worst placement she ever experienced but contact with her former foster carer helped her stay calm and avoid doing anything foolish.

'She worried about me running away and would ask me how would an 11-year-old find her way across London? I didn't call very often, maybe I spoke to her every couple of months. But it was a bit of a life saver.'

The report of the recent groundbreaking Care Inquiry, which the Fostering Network helped to set up and deliver, described relationships as a 'golden thread' in the lives of looked after children. But what happens when the threads are snapped?

Gill fostered Luke for six years, but

after the placement broke down they wished to continue seeing each other. Children's services initially restricted contact to once every three months, before stopping it all together.

This happened after Luke started crying. He said he did not understand why he could not see his former family more often and still called his ex-foster carers 'mum' and 'dad'. He said he was depressed and wanted to kill himself, according to Gill.

She cuddled him and quietly explained that they did want to see him more often but he needed to be brave and keep talking to his social worker. However, the social worker said that contact would stop because Gill had used 'physical contact' and 'whispered' to him.

She believes Luke has been 'abandoned' and has gone to court for the right to see him. A further hearing is due.

The Fostering Network often hears from foster carers in this situation, and is developing policy to share with governments and fostering services on supporting contact between foster carers and former fostered children.

Chief executive Robert Tapsfield says: 'The quality of the relationships we have helps us to live our lives. It is the same for children. Good relationships build trust, and help children create a sense of belonging and identity.'

'Maintaining good relationships can matter more than anything else for children in care. But all too often I hear from foster carers and young people who were not supported in maintaining relationships with people who were important to them when they moved.'

He adds: 'Children need a care system that places

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ERINA NALUWAGA





PHOTO: Jo Morris (this image and front cover modelled)

relationships at its heart. Children need local authorities to help them keep the relationships which are valuable to them and we need governments to ensure the guidance and regulations require this.'

Painful

Sometimes even a planned change results in a painful separation. Sandra fostered Kevin for 10 years until he was 12. She says: 'We provided a loving, caring and safe environment. Social services were happy for him to live with us, even though his birth mother went to court three times, to have him back.'

Kevin called Sandra 'mum' and saw her birth children as his brother and sisters. However he became violent as he grew older and this increased when he reached secondary school.

Sandra explains: 'Social services moved him to an alternative (residential) school where he could get therapy. We were happy to have him back for weekends and in the holidays. To start with we went to see him for a few hours every weekend, while he settled. However, when he was due to come home his social worker said it wasn't a good idea and he has never been allowed home in 15 months.'

'This was confusing for Kevin as he understood the need to go to a different school but did not understand why he wasn't allowed 'home'. He told me, "It's as if the 10 years I lived with you mean nothing at all to them, but it means everything to me".'

'He knows he can complain and may take social

services to court but why should such a vulnerable child be put in that position?'

Now after 15 years, Sandra and her partner have decided to give up fostering.

'The impact was devastating,' she adds. 'We were completely bewildered by the way social services behaved towards us. We were left in the dark about their decisions.'

Close the door

In another case, Bill and Mary fostered six-year-old Jade. Mary says: 'It was with real sadness for us all that the placement ended just before her 14th birthday, following increasingly difficult and sometimes violent behaviour.'

And Bill comments: 'Despite all the problems she always thought of us as her family and we wished to maintain a relationship which we thought would be in her best interests.'

However, the social worker was against this approach, telling the couple that if the girl visited, they should close the door. Mary adds: 'We considered this unreasonable. Her new placement lasted six months, during which time she regularly asked to see us but was actively discouraged.'

Bill asks if anyone can explain the evidence-base for the approach taken. 'In our case, Jade's need to maintain contact demonstrated the basis of attachment, something that she had never shown before.'

Mary also feels that previous foster carers are not respected and that their knowledge of the children is not

used to help a child settle with new foster carers.

'We are not allowed to be involved in decision-making and yet we know what she is like. Her history is with us. We are not treated like professionals even though the government's guidelines say we should be.'

Change is needed

The report of the Care Inquiry says: 'Our main conclusion – from all that we heard and learnt – is that "permanence" for children means "security, stability, love and a strong sense of identity and belonging".'

It continues: 'The weight of evidence, from all quarters, convinces us that the relationships with people who care for and about children are the golden thread in children's lives, and that the quality of a child's relationships is the lens through which we should view what we do and plan to do.'

The Care Inquiry has developed recommendations that support this approach and are consistent with the principles that underpin the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Human Rights Act.

Care leavers also back up the Care Inquiry's conclusions about relationships. David Graham, national director of the Care Leavers Association, comments: 'We support contact with ex-foster carers if the young person wishes to have contact and it is good and safe for them to do so.'

'It's generally accepted that developing meaningful bonds and relationships with adults is a good skill for young people to acquire and helps with their positive emotional development. Breaking this bond and refusing contact creates a sense of loss, reinforcing a sense of 'I

Too much contact with an ex-foster carer can unsettle a child

am not wanted – I am not loveable".'

Clearly a balance needs to be struck and children's social workers and supervising social workers will have to consider the passionate views of former foster carers.

For instance, Susanna Daus operations manager, fostering and adoption at Islington Council, in London, acknowledges it is better for children to keep in touch with their previous carers if at all possible. But she adds:

Further information

Call our helplines:

England

t 020 7401 9582 *Member Helpline*

Scotland

t 0141 204 1400 *Fosterline Scotland*

Wales

t 0800 316 7664 *Fosterline Wales*

Northern Ireland

t 028 9070 5056 *Advice and Information Service*

The Local Government Ombudsman investigates complaints of injustice arising from maladministration by local authorities.

England www.lgo.org.uk

Scotland www.spsos.org.uk

Northern Ireland www.nidirect.gov.uk/make-a-complaint-to-the-northern-ireland-ombudsman

Wales www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk

'Foster carers need to make sure they talk their own feelings through with their supervising social worker so they can continue to have a positive relationship with their former fostered child.'

And one social worker who did not wish to be named says: 'Too much contact with an ex-foster carer can unsettle a child. The child's wishes need to be balanced alongside the social worker's assessment of their needs now and in the future and what is in their best interests.'

The transition from one foster carer to another, especially in the wake of a relationship breakdown is a difficult and potentially traumatic time. Many people keep in touch or repair relationships after a rupture in their personal lives. Where appropriate, that opportunity should be there for young people and foster carers who have shared a great deal together. It is key way to build resilience and understand the complexities of adult life. ●

All names of foster carers and young people have been changed to protect confidentiality

www.fostering.net/position-statements

Where you stand in the UK

In **England** the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services set out the expectation that 'Foster carers are supported to maintain links with children moving on, consistent with their care plan' and there is provision in the Children Act for 'significant others' to apply for contact, but no automatic right.

The 2007 Placement Of Children Regulations in **Wales** say responsible authorities are to have regard to: 'Arrangements for contact, and whether there is any need for changes in the arrangements in order to promote contact with the child's family and others, so far as is consistent with his or her welfare.'

In **Scotland**, the Guidance on the Looked After Children Regulations 2009 says a local authority

has a duty 'to promote on a regular basis, personal relations and direct contact between the child and any person with parental responsibilities'. However this is not an absolute right.

They add that, 'For children and young people, the process of moving, with attendant losses, can have long lasting effects,' but there is nothing specific about foster carers keeping in contact with fostered children after they have left the foster family.

In **Northern Ireland** there is capacity to apply for contact but only if the foster carer has the consent of the authority, is a relative of the child or the child has lived with them for at least three years preceding the application.

