

## Fosterline Wales Factsheet

### Secure base for adolescents

#### Introduction

Adolescents who have the benefit of a secure base are more likely to be able to develop security, confidence, competence and resilience. The relationship with one or more caregivers, who offer a reliable base from which to explore the world and a safe haven for reassurance when there are challenges in their life, is very important to the young person. Establishing this relationship can be challenging, as it is heavily linked to attachment theory and the adolescent's secure base.

The secure base model was devised by Mary Beeks and Gillian Schofield, [Centre for Research on Children and Families](#) at the University of East Anglia. It focuses on:

- five central dimensions of caregiving (detailed below), crucial to the secure base
- both the young person's attachment style and their internal working model, how they view the world and themselves.

Providing a secure base reduces an adolescent's anxiety and enables the young person to safely explore, to think, to enjoy play and learning and to fulfil their potential.

Key to promoting security and resilience is mind-mindedness:

- the carer thinking about what is in the mind of the young person
- what purpose does the challenging behaviour serve

Attachment focuses attention on the quality of the adolescent's experience in the relationship with the caregiver as an active source of therapeutic care.

Security and resilience come not just from relationships with specific attachment figures but from a secure base provided by the young person's whole environment (family, friends, school, activities).

## **Availability – helping the young person to *develop* trust**

**Carers need to be** available both physically and emotionally to the young person, with the ability to recognise and signal availability in age-appropriate ways; timing the relationship ‘dance’ at the pace of each young person. It is essential that predictable ‘safe’ routines are provided within the home and that the young person feels special/cared for and that they matter and are being thought about when they are not with you, for example by texting WhatsApping them.

**Challenges to be aware of with this approach** include understanding that the young person needs you to be constantly available and that you are central to that young person’s wellbeing. The young person may well need the same amount of intense support and connection as a newborn initially, which could feel strange and awkward. There is a real fear that you may worry that you don’t have enough time with the young person to repair their early years trauma and, for many teens receiving appropriate care for the first time, they may initially appear to reject this - it is not a rejection of you.

## **Sensitivity – helping the young person to understand and manage feelings**

**Caregiving approaches** include tuning into your young person, reading signals, anticipating distress, containing anxiety. Try naming thoughts and feelings – providing a ‘commentary’ for them as explanation. Provide a scaffolding experience – giving a predictable shape to events, such as mealtimes, pocket money, house rules and expectations, so there are no surprises. You need to manage your own thoughts, feelings and expressions to provide appropriate modelling for them. Always think of how you are portraying and promoting empathy and discuss how you/how might other people think and feel.

**Challenges to be aware of with this approach** include a young person may feel that they don’t understand their own feelings or be unable to communicate them - ‘I just feel angry’. This may lead to them appearing uninterested in the feelings of others and lacking empathy. Trauma can distort an adolescent’s ability to cope, which has taught the young person to be quickly triggered into rage or become overwhelmed as their natural reaction. Bear in mind that young people may say very hurtful things to others when they are angry and upset.

## **Acceptance – promoting self esteem**

**Caregiving approaches** can include promoting within the family the idea that ‘nobody’s good at everything, but everybody’s good at something’. Look for special strengths/talents in the young person, praising them and letting them know they are important, loved and loveable. Find activities to do and to share, this can result in ‘orchestrated’ achievements, as learning opportunities allow failures and setbacks to

happen and help the young person gain insight that this is normal. Model and teach the young person to accept and celebrate differences in self and others, their ethnicity, personality, talents.

**Challenges to be aware of with this approach** include recognising that many adolescents may appear as avoidant, needing focused encouragement to take up a new hobby, but then they may quit at the first set back. So, great patience is required to support an adolescent to deal with setbacks effectively and you must be able to manage your own emotions and triggers. It is common for many young people to have very low expectations for their future: 'I couldn't do that, I'm not clever'.

## **Co-operation – helping the young person to feel effective**

**Caregiving approaches** include, wherever possible, offering choices, even for small things. Help young people to follow through/achieve results, both on their own and with help. For example, they could plan a trip and go on it, take photos and have them printed and see them framed. Involve a young person in family tasks so everyone can see the benefit of teamwork. Always be aware of modelling co-operative behaviour with other family members, as well as demonstrating co-operation on a practical basis with the young person.

**Challenges to be aware of with this approach** include an awareness that trauma experienced young people rarely enter care with age appropriate levels of autonomy. The result of years of inconsistent, frightening and neglectful care can leave young people unsure of the balance of power between adults and themselves. The simple move into care, and then often frequent new placement moves, can impact on a young person's sense of powerlessness, as a result it can increase the need for young person to reject new carers in order to enable them to feel they have reclaimed some of the lost control.

## **Family membership – helping the young person belong**

**Caregiving approaches include being** accepting of the young person's developing identity. Ensure the young person understands how this family does things, include them in foster family life/photos. Enable the young person to talk about and value their birth family and discuss appropriate contact arrangements. Be accepting of the young person's family and always talk honestly, but positively. Try to manage contact in ways that promote the young person's wellbeing and comfortable sense of belonging in both families.

**Challenges to be aware of with this approach** include under-estimation of the potential stresses and strains that are involved in making the move into a new family for a young person, while managing feelings of loss and strong, though in some cases potentially rather destructive, ties to birth families. This child is part of your family or group as well as part of his or her birth family, so your approach will need to be adapted to the child's (often changing) needs and circumstances. It can be

difficult to balance the family dynamics between birth and fostered children, holding a balance between two powerful and sometimes conflicting ideas. This is with the aim of helping the child to feel a coherent sense of identity in what may be a complex network of relationships

## **Resources**

More information can be found at <https://www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/home>

## **How The Fostering Network can help**

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

### **Advice**

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us at:

[fosterlinewales@fostering.net](mailto:fosterlinewales@fostering.net)

### **Support and resources**

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

[thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

### **Training and consultancy**

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information, contact our Learning and Development Manager, Sarah Mobedji at [sarah.mobedji@fostering.net](mailto:sarah.mobedji@fostering.net).

There is secure base training available at times as open courses. Information regarding this can be found would be on The Fostering Network's [Training and Events](#) page of The Fostering Network's website.

If you are a fostering service and would like to commission this training, please contact Sarah on [sarah.mobedji@fostering.net](mailto:sarah.mobedji@fostering.net).

This course will develop the practitioner's knowledge and competence in using the secure base model in their direct work with children and young people by analysing their potential to meet their needs in each of the five dimensions of caregiving.

The training will:

- support foster carers in the use of the secure base model as a theoretical framework in the development of secure attachment with children and young people
- explore internal working models and attachment behaviours for children and young people who are looked after
- discuss practical ways to build the security of belonging to and becoming part of a family.

For more information contact our Learning and Development Manager, Sarah Mobedji at [sarah.mobedji@fostering.net](mailto:sarah.mobedji@fostering.net)

### **About The Fostering Network**

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

### **Contact us**

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:

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