

Social pedagogy in practice: Building resilience

Foster carers who have been exploring social pedagogy through our Head, Heart, Hands programme have found that some of the concepts and tools have helped them to boost their resilience and the resilience of the children and young people they care for. In this resource we explore resilience, hear directly from foster carers about their experience of boosting it within their households, and share some reflection exercises that you might want to try for yourself.

Resilience for children and young people

Children and young people in foster care are likely to have experienced many challenges in their lives, and developing the ability to deal with future challenges can make a huge difference to their wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

Liz, a foster carer who took part in Head, Heart, Hands, is currently fostering two girls, Lauren and Abigail. The girls have lived with Liz and her family for the last two years, but both encountered considerable adversity before coming into care. Working with them to build up their resilience has been an ongoing process, and has sometimes been challenging, as Liz explains: 'They've not only been learning about themselves, and learning about the world and going to school and all of the things we want them to do, but they have also had to cope with having to absorb a series of very difficult pieces of information during the same time period.'

Liz has noticed a huge difference in the way her foster daughters react to being told difficult information since she has been incorporating social pedagogy into her practice: 'As the years have gone by, and as they have got used to working through their emotions and talking to us about how they feel, they're able to manage that bit of information far more effectively, by thinking and talking about how it's made them feel, and thinking about how they're going to be able to cope.'

She believes that for the children resilience goes hand in hand with self-esteem - the more their self-esteem increases, the more their resilience is built. Forming strong relationships and learning new skills have both contributed towards their growing self-esteem. Liz believes that a vital factor for them is realising that they can do something that they could not do before, and also understanding that they can benefit from taking responsibility for their own learning. She gives an example of teaching Abigail how to tie her shoelaces, encouraging her, but not doing it for her. While at first Abigail would become cross that Liz wasn't doing it for her, she then mastered the skill and recognised that it was important and exciting that she had been able to learn to do it for herself. Liz has seen how Abigail has been able to apply this learning to other situations resulting in increased confidence and feeling more able to tackle new challenges.

Empowering children to take ownership of their own learning can enable them to gain a sense of control over their own lives. Social pedagogic practice emphasises the importance of empowerment, 'In order to ensure that an individual experiences a sense of control over their life, feels involved in decisions affecting them, and is able to make sense of their own universe. Empowerment also means that the individual is able to take on ownership and responsibility for their own learning and their own wellbeing and happiness, as well as their relationship with the community.' (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012). Had Liz not stepped back and let Abigail learn to tie her own shoelaces, she would have missed out on the sense of achievement and boost to confidence that she gained.

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Foster carers involved in the Head, Heart, Hands programme have noticed a significant change in their practice. They have more frequently started to do things *with* their children, whereas they previously would have done things *for* them. They have also found they more consciously create conditions in which children and young people can do things for themselves.

Some of the foster carers have found a quote by the psychologist Jean Piaget particularly powerful to help them reflect: *'When you teach a child something you take away forever his chance of discovering it for himself'*

Can you think of situations with your foster child in which you could take a step back and let them try new things? How might taking ownership of their own learning make a difference to their self-esteem and therefore to their resilience?

Resilience for foster carers

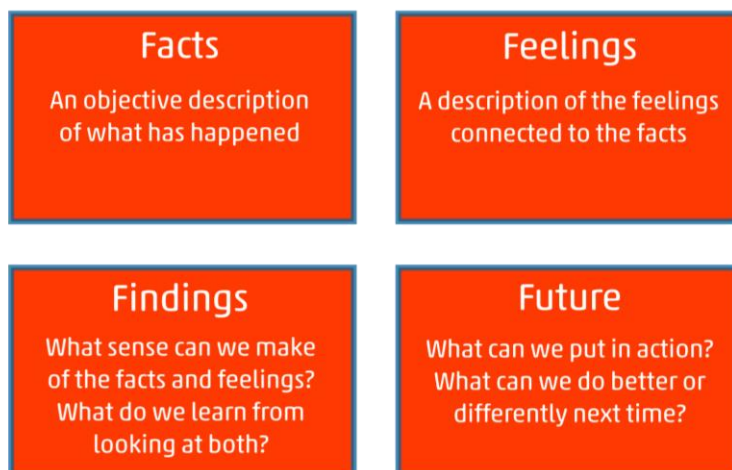
As well as aiming to support the resilience and wellbeing of those you care for, it is important to be able to achieve this for yourself. Being a foster carer can be challenging, and carers who are able to bounce back from adversity and keep a positive outlook are better able to cope with the stresses and demands that the role may bring. Foster carers on the Head, Heart, Hands programme have been able to increase their resilience in a variety of ways.

Many have found that **learning reflective skills** has enabled them to build resilience. Being able to take a step back and think before reacting, challenging their own assumptions or reflecting on what has caused a situation, has helped them cope better with difficulties and move forwards in a positive way, without coming up against the same problems over and over again. One foster carer, Phil, says that before learning how to be reflective, he and his partner, 'Weren't able to reflect and review – we didn't cope and felt like we needed to give up.' Now, coping with his foster child's sometimes challenging behaviour does not faze him, 'I don't flare up at things he might do in the way that I used to. Social pedagogy has helped me to see what we might have done wrong.'

Liz says that being able to reflect on events helps her to plan how to move forwards. She talks about learning how to manage the secondary trauma process that can occur for her as a foster carer in relation to some of the issues her children have experienced. 'You sit down and you talk about what's happened and you reflect, either with yourself, or with someone else who understands the process that you've been through and the situations that you've found yourself in, so that you can talk openly about what's happened and how you can move on.'

Reflection has also made a big difference for Sandra, another Head, Heart, Hands foster carer who has gained a lot of self-awareness through becoming more reflective in the way she approaches her practice. Sandra recently went through a challenging period caring for her foster daughter, and this self-awareness enabled her to recognise that she needed to take a step back and recover, and her partner was able to take on more of a leading role in caring for their daughter. If Sandra had not realised that she needed to take care of herself in this way, and allowed herself the permission to do so, she would have become increasingly pushed to her limits and struggled to continue in her role. She believes, 'You need to know yourself in order to do a good job and look after these children. We all carry around baggage and have our own stories. If you're not aware of your buttons that are pushed, you get stuck.' Having an understanding of her own triggers has helped her instil protective measures for herself before reaching breaking point. This has not only heightened her own wellbeing, but has ensured placement stability for her child.

Social pedagogy provides a number of reflection tools that can give people a useful structure to enable them to step back, review, reflect, plan a way forward, and take learning into the future. A model that has been particularly well received by foster carers is called the Four Fs (Greenaway, 1992).



The model provides a structure that supports you to separate facts from feelings – but values both as equally important. When you're in a difficult situation, or feeling stressed and overwhelmed, it can sometimes feel hard to understand what's happened, and plan what to do next, because the feelings and emotions you're dealing with can get in the way of the facts. Equally, in these situations, it can sometimes be hard to really understand how you're feeling, and deal with that appropriately, because you may be ignoring your emotions while you try and establish the facts. The Four Fs model is very simple, but foster carers have found that it has given them a valuable structure to work through this challenge.

Daniel's story of using the Four Fs reflection to support resilience

In the story below Daniel, a foster carer from Head, Heart, Hands, shares how he and his partner used the Four Fs model to tackle a challenging situation they faced.

'We used this model in our latest supervision meeting. We were upset about a looked after child review meeting and didn't feel the minutes were accurate. Feelings were running high but this model made us focus on the facts first. Every time feelings were boiling over, our supervising social worker, who is also trained as a social pedagogue, made us focus on the facts. This was a good way of cooling things down. We focused on what happened as a way of collecting evidence.

'Our supervisor wrote down the key facts relating to the meeting. She then allowed us to focus on the feelings aroused. This section of the reviewing cycle looks at the quality of the experience – how you felt, physically and emotionally. Our supervisor also shared her feelings – she had left the meeting feeling concerned about us. Her honesty was really helpful and made us feel like we weren't alone or going mad!

'We then moved on to the findings. This is more analytical and rational – we looked at the first two stages and tried to think about what else might be going on under the surface of the meeting and why. We came up with hypotheses and tried to see things from different perspectives.

'The futures section of the cycle involved applying our learning from this experience and deciding on what action to take. Our supervisor agreed to take forward our complaints and we agreed to have another meeting to try to resolve issues. We also reflected on how we might handle a similar situation in the future.'

In Daniel's story you can see how the Four Fs model helped him and his partner to reflect on a difficult situation and move forward in a way that felt satisfactory to them. The structure provided by the model helped them to navigate the complexities of the situation and enabled them to work with their supervising social worker to understand what had happened, take a step back and look at the situation from different perspectives, and agree a way forward. It also gave them some learning that they can apply in the future.

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Take some time to reflect on the Four Fs model. Can you think of a situation, from your past, or perhaps something that you're dealing with at the moment, where you might find this model gives you a helpful structure?

How might you be able to use the Four Fs in your practice?

Find out more...

Visit thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/hhh for more Social Pedagogy in Practice sheets and further information about Head, heart, Hands.