

Social pedagogy in practice: Panels, assessments and reviews

Through your work as a foster carer, you will be involved in a number of different meetings, panels, reviews and assessments. Some, like the fostering panel and your supervision meetings, will focus on you and your needs. Others, such as the Looked After Child review and Personal Education Plan review, will focus on the child or young person in your care. These different meetings are essential for making sure that children and young people growing up in foster care are able to reach their potential – and for ensuring that foster carers have the information and support they need.

In this resource we hear from Head, Heart, Hands foster carers who share their experiences of preparing for these different meetings, offer some thoughts about the models that have helped them, and give ideas that you could incorporate into your own practice.

Working as a team

When we talked to foster carers about what helped them most when they were preparing for panels, assessments and reviews, it was clear that establishing good relationships with other professionals in the team around the child was felt to be absolutely key. As Rachel, a foster carer who took part in the Head, Heart, Hands programme explained, 'In terms of going to the fostering panel, I think it's all about the relationship between you and your supervising social worker. They have the responsibility for preparing you as well as they possibly can so that's a really important relationship. With each supervising social worker we've had, we've just been ourselves and been authentic and very open.'

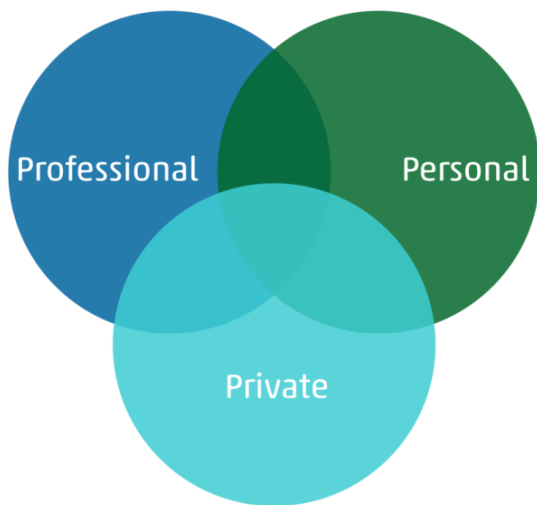
Rachel also feels that the mindset you have before meetings is hugely important. 'When you go to panel, you should try and keep in mind that people are there with an optimistic view point – they're not trying to trip you up. Everyone is looking for the best outcome, if you keep that in mind I think it's easier to deal with.'

Peter, another foster carer from the Head, Heart, Hands programme, agrees that building strong relationships with other professionals in the team has been key for him. Through exploring social pedagogy he has built up his confidence and learnt new approaches that have helped him to make meetings work better for him: 'I'm more confident and I'm able to contribute more now. I can speak openly and I'm less worried about what questions might be asked. It's a more open and natural conversation. The last meeting we had, it was a panel - but it was quite fun. It wasn't something to lose sleep over. I knew the panel chair had a new dog so we started off just having a discussion about that.'

Building relationships

Many foster carers have fed back that a social pedagogic reflection model called the Three Ps (Jappe, 2010) has been particularly useful. It has helped them think about what they're bringing to relationships and given them a framework to use. As a result they have built more holistic relationships with other adults in the team around the child – helping them to develop a personal as well as a professional connection.

The Three Ps model suggests we are all made of three parts: our professional self, our personal self and our private self. In each relationship and situation we find ourselves in, it is important to reflect on the mix of the three we choose to bring with us.



The **professional** part of us relates to the responsibilities, knowledge and skills connected with the work or role we are undertaking. It provides us with a professional framework that can help guide our interactions and decisions.

The **personal** part of us is around recognising the uniqueness we offer as an individual. Sharing our own experiences, stories, preferences, strengths and weaknesses.

Allowing people to see this more personal side of ourselves helps to create authentic relationships and enables us to use our full potential. Appropriately sharing something from your personal self to deepen a connection or break down a barrier.

The **private** part of us is around the area of our life that we would only choose to share with those closest to us, if at all. Sharing something from the private self inappropriately may leave us feeling vulnerable. We have to carefully reflect on the line between personal and private and acknowledge that this line will move depending on the situation we are in and who we are working with.

Rachel found the Three Ps to be really helpful, 'For foster carers the Three Ps are important – in fact they're important for everybody! I use the Three Ps in the lead up to a meeting to think about my presentation. It helps me plan ways of explaining things and ways of presenting myself. It helps me to think about what the right balance is.

'When you're building a relationship with the children in your home you obviously have to think about your professional role, but you also need to appropriately share that personal side of you too. It's the same with the other adults you're working with. You have to manage your own information affectively, and use it to build meaningful relationships that will help the children.'

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Take some time to reflect on the Three Ps model.

Think about the relationships you have with the young people in your care and with the other adults and professionals in the team around them. Think about the different mixes of private, personal and professional you bring to each relationship. Have you got the balance right?

Is there more you can do to explore what you might personally have in common?

Supporting children and young people to have a voice

Many of the meetings you will attend will focus on the needs of the child or young person in your care. In these meetings you will have a vital role in supporting that child or young person to have a voice, or, if they are not there in person, advocating on their behalf. Throughout the Head, Heart, Hands programme foster carers have found their confidence as advocates growing because they have been able to build stronger relationships with their children and the other adults in the team around them. To read more about this look at our other social pedagogy in practice resources:

- Building stronger relationships with children and young people
- Building stronger relationships with the team around the child

Lifeworld Orientation

One concept from social pedagogy that foster carers have found helpful when reflecting on how to support a child to be heard is Lifeworld Orientation (Grundwald & Thiersch, 2009). At its heart, Lifeworld Orientation teaches that in order to support a child to successfully navigate the world and reach their potential, we must first understand what their current world feels like for them, and how this impacts their view of themselves and their place in society. It is a structured approach that helps you to “put yourself in someone else’s shoes”, but it takes you a step beyond simply thinking about what their world is like, and helps you to really explore how this may influence their thought processes, interpretations and behaviours. Foster carers have fed back that reflecting on Lifeworld Orientation has helped them to better understand how their child is interacting with the world, as well as helping them increase their empathy with other professionals in the team around that child. They have also found that spending time really examining their own Lifeworld Orientation has helped them to understand themselves better and shone some light on some of their own assumptions, interpretations and behaviours.

Lifeworld Orientation supports you to think about people (children and adults) as a whole, within their own context, rather than looking at isolated snapshots or specific situations and problems. Amongst other things, it encourages you to reflect on their likes, dislikes, strengths, responsibilities, family context, key relationships, culture, religion, language, education, background and impact of significant life events. Social pedagogy supports you to question the assumption that “one size fits all” and Lifeworld Orientation helps you to think about how you may need to tailor your approach to meet the different needs of the children and adults you are working with.

Use of Terminology

Something that has regularly been discussed as part of Head, Heart, Hands has been the language that is used by the team. People have taken the opportunity to reflect on the words that are used and the implications these may have - particularly stepping into the lifeworld of children and thinking about the impact that some of the language may have on them. As Peter points out, ‘We need to start addressing the language we use. Why are we calling it “contact”? Why can’t we call it “time with your mum”?’

One of the fostering services that took part in Head, Heart, Hands did an extensive review of the language they used and looked at it from a child’s point of view. As a result of this they made changes to the words they used and committed to banishing acronyms from their vocabulary.

<i>Case/Client</i>	changed to	<i>child or young person</i>
<i>Contact</i>	changed to	<i>time with mum/dad/family</i>
<i>Foster placement</i>	changed to	<i>foster home/place to live</i>
<i>LAC</i>	changed to	<i>looked after child</i>
<i>Respite care</i>	changed to	<i>sleep over</i>
<i>Transition</i>	changed to	<i>preparation for adulthood</i>

Sometimes you may not have the ability to change the language that other people use, you may also find that tackling language change across a whole system takes a lot of time and a great deal of dialogue. However, there are small steps you can take in your own home that could make a real difference to the way that you and the young people in your care feel. As Peter shares, even if the formal language used in paperwork or at a meeting can't be changed, you can still think about how best to talk this through at home: 'Generally the way that it works for us is that we think of a child-friendly and non-threatening way to tell our son what the meeting is about, and that's our role really, to put him at ease, and then after the meeting we report back to him in the same way.'

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Have a think about the language you're using. Does it feel like the right fit for the child in your home?

Are there changes in the way that you and your family talk that may make a big difference to the way you and your children feel? Could you involve your supervising social worker and the child's social worker in this discussion about language?

Find out more...

Visit thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/hhh

for more Social Pedagogy in Practice sheets and further information about Head, heart, Hands.