

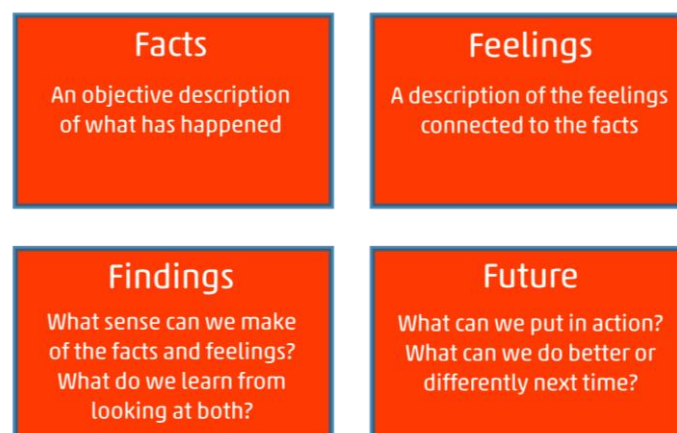
Social pedagogy in practice: Building relationships with children and young people

Relationships have been described as ‘the golden thread running through a child’s life’ (Care Inquiry, 2013). As a foster carer, you have the vital role of supporting the child or young person in your home to develop positive relationships that will help them to feel secure, build their resilience and develop their sense of belonging. The foster carers who have been exploring social pedagogy with us through our Head, Heart, Hands programme, have found that incorporating a social pedagogic approach into their practice has helped them to further strengthen and deepen the relationships they have with the children and young people in their care.

In this resource, we meet Lorraine, a foster carer who, along with her husband Tony, has been fostering for several years and currently looks after thirteen-year-old Jess. Lorraine has found that social pedagogy has transformed her practice. In the story below, Lorraine describes how she used a reflection model called the Four Fs (Greenaway, 1992), to deal with an occasion when Jess ran away from home, and how using this model led to a strengthened relationship between them.

Lorraine’s experience of the Four Fs

‘Reflection is an important part of social pedagogy, as it supports continuing development as an individual and foster carer. We need to be able to stand back and reflect on situations that arise, how it affects the child, our reactions and why we reacted in the way we did, and what we would do differently next time. I was given a range of models to help me reflect; one I find particularly useful is the four-stage reviewing cycle, commonly known as the Four Fs.



‘We recently had to deal with an incident where Jess ran away as a consequence of having to deal with too many big changes in her life. When she was returned home she said she wanted to ‘go away’ to think, and wanted to go into respite. It was thought by all involved that if this happened she would not return.

‘In conversation with my supervising social worker we felt that the Four Fs may be a good way of recording the facts of the incident and also help me to reflect in depth on the situation and find some possible ways of moving forward.

‘Firstly, the **facts**: writing this down provided all the information that would be asked for in an incident report.

‘Secondly, the **feelings**: this part allowed me to reflect on my own feelings about the incident and also to reflect on the various professional visits and birth family contact running up to the incident. These events had a massive impact on Jess and evoked very strong feelings and emotional responses from tears to anger.

‘Thirdly, the **findings**: recognising that prior to her running away there had been some very difficult information imparted to her that overloaded her. We looked at this in detail. Jess was feeling absolutely out of control of her life and was desperately trying to hang on to control in the only way she knew how: she shut down and was trying to withdraw from everyone, including us.

‘Last of all is the **future**: I recognised that we need to acknowledge that her stubbornness and tenacity means that if she is feeling out of control she will carry out her threats, in this case running away. Therefore I needed to reflect on how I could best help her as she was unable to have the respite she wanted. I wrote her a letter and told her that I recognised that she needed space to think and she could stay in her room as much as she wanted until she felt ready to re-join us. However one of my conditions was that I would just need to check on her each morning and if she wanted food she’d need to communicate this to me. She then started sending me notes such as “I’m hungry, food please x.” So I spent the next two days taking snacks to her room and slowly conversations started. She then agreed she would come down to eat when I was the only one home and after five days she was back eating dinner with us.’

My letter to Jess

Dear Jess

I know you are in a very difficult place at the moment and I know that you probably haven't had the results you wanted so I just wanted to tell you what I can do to try and support you.

You have your own room and bathroom and therefore you do not have to see anyone all the time if you don't want to.

I am quite happy for you to spend the time in your room trying to think things through if that's what you want.

I am quite happy for you to go out walking on your own through the day as long as you give me a time you'll be back. Exercise and fresh air often help.

I will from time to time check on you if I need to tell you something, but will give you as much personal space as I can.

I know you're not feeling hungry but I will always ask if you want to eat, and I am even happy to cook an earlier meal for you if you would prefer to eat alone.

Finally I feel you want to be alone at the moment but when or if you need me for anything you know I will always be there for you as will Tony, because we care about you very much.

Love Lorraine

‘Since I wrote Jess that letter, she has done quite a lot of writing of letters back to us. It opened a door to her to communicate with us in a different way. As a gift, she produced a booklet, several pages long, on “Lorraine and Tony and being awesome.” It can move me to tears. Since this new avenue of communication was opened, the relationship has strengthened. Social pedagogy has taught me that there are many ways to build relationships in the everyday.

‘Now, even when we go through difficult times with Jess, I can pick up her booklet and remember that there is another level to how she feels about us. I reflect every night using the Diamond Model (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2012), and think about one positive thing about our relationship. Social pedagogy and the Diamond Model emphasise positive regard – seeing the diamond inside everyone. Some nights I might pick up that book to remind myself of the positives.’

Lorraine suggests reflecting at the end of each day by thinking of one good thing about your foster child. For her, on some days this is easier than on others: ‘Sometimes she gives me that positive – last night she came in and told me how well she’d done in her science test – there was the diamond! Other days you might just be able to manage something about their appearance – maybe their smile can brighten your day’.

Reflection exercise – try this at home

Spend some time reflecting on the Four Fs model and the story that Lorraine has shared.

Can you think of a situation in which you, or your family, may have found it useful to use the structure the Four Fs model gives you?

How might you be able to use the model in the future?

Lorraine and Tony have worked hard to help Jess take positive steps in her life. Although Jess’s behaviour can be challenging at times, by working on their relationship with her in a social pedagogic way, they have been able to help her make good progress. They have provided her with the care and stability she needs in order to build her confidence and wellbeing. The creative methods they have used have yielded positive and sometimes surprising results. You do not need to have been trained in social pedagogy to put to use the models described here. Can you try out some of these suggestions and see what changes might begin to happen in your own home?

Find out more...

Visit thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/hhh

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