

Retrospective Insights from Ex-Foster Children: Characteristics of Successful Foster Placements

Final Report

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Introduction	4
Methodology.....	4
Fieldwork Administration.....	4
Sample.....	5
Analysis	5
Findings	5
1. Definition of a Successful Placement.....	5
2. Characteristics of Good Carers.....	7
Motivations	7
Provision of Care	7
Foster Siblings	8
Experience with Children	9
Personal Characteristics.....	9
Overall	11
3. Factors Relating to the Child	12
Birth Family Relationships.....	12
Support.....	13
Age of the Child.....	14
Moving Placements.....	14
4. The Foster Care Agency	15
Caseworkers.....	15
Financial Support	18
Screening of Carers	18
5. Community Attitudes.....	18
Perceptions of Foster Care.....	18
Treatment of Foster Children	20
6. Overall Assessment of Foster Care	21
7. Recommendations for Improvement	22
Fewer placement moves.....	22
More listening to kids	22
More carers available	23

Improved quality of carers.....	23
Reduced caseworker loads	23
More checking on carers.....	24
Support when leaving and after care.....	24
Relationships with birth families and siblings.....	25
Let foster kids be normal kids.....	25
Alternatives to respite care.....	25
Improved public perceptions of foster care	26
Government responsiveness to children in need	26

Introduction

Most empirical studies of foster care focus on individuals who are, at the time of fieldwork, involved in the foster care system in some capacity. For example, they focus on managers of foster care programs, case workers, foster carers, or the children themselves. Research that takes the perspective of the foster child when they are in care can only offer a relatively immature and often intensely emotional perspective on the situation, simply because they are at such a young age at the time of the fieldwork and they have not had the opportunity or time to process their experiences.

A less common approach is research which focuses on individuals who have personal experience of being in foster care, but who are now adults. This approach is beneficial because it not only gains the perspective of someone with direct experience of complex foster care arrangements, but also because the individual has matured to the point where they can reflect on their experience, the outcome, and what they feel would have been more appropriate for someone in their situation. In addition, many individuals who were in foster care have formed networks with other foster children – for example through holiday camps or agency social gatherings - and have, to differing degrees, shared their personal experiences with each other. They are therefore able to provide an opinion on most aspects of foster care even if it was not part of their personal experience.

The aims of this study are to:

1. identify how ex-foster children define and describe a “successful” foster placement;
2. identify what ex-foster children believe are the defining characteristics of good foster carers;
3. understand the importance of the role of the foster care agency in a foster placement and the characteristics of good caseworkers;
4. understand the perceived community knowledge of, and attitudes towards, children in foster care; and
5. identify the perceived problems with the foster care system and the changes that ex-foster children believe need to be made to improve outcomes for children in care.

Methodology

Fieldwork Administration

Eleven interviews were conducted between July 2009 and June 2010. Participants were recruited through local foster care organisations (CareSouth and CatholicCare) and through the CREATE Foundation – an organisation set up to represent the views of children and young people in care. In all cases participants were contacted by a member of the relevant foster care agency and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. If they gave consent, their details were provided to the researcher, who then contacted each individual to arrange an interview time and place that was convenient to them. Interviews took between 20 and 40 minutes and, with permission from the participant, were recorded and later transcribed. Interviews were conducted in the Illawarra, South

Coast, Sydney metropolitan, Central Coast and mid-North Coast regions of New South Wales in Australia.

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of individuals who were over the age of 18 and who had been in foster care as children. Five participants were male and six were female. Participants ranged in age from 18-28 years and were in care with a range of different agencies, including both government and non-government. The number of placements experienced by participants ranged from 1 to 39.

Analysis

Data was managed, stored, analysed and coded by the interviewer, using NVivo 8.0. Due to the possibility of recognition, any details that could reveal participants' identities (for example, age or location of residence) were omitted. However, it should be noted that all 11 participants are represented in the quotations used to illustrate the points made in the following sections.

Findings

1. Definition of a Successful Placement

For all interviews, discussion began with an open-ended question which asked participants to describe a successful foster placement. Despite the fact that this question required an unaided response, participant responses could be grouped into common themes.

For the most part, answers to this question related to how the ex-foster children *felt* when they were in a good placement. First and foremost, participants expressed the need to feel **genuinely wanted** by the carers and other members of the household. They wanted to feel like they belonged in the home and were not simply visiting until another placement could be found. Participants indicated that this was achieved by being treated as a member of the family by carers, and by being given all the rights and responsibilities that would be given to the carers' own children, for example, being able to join in on family activities and have friends over like other children did.

"I think the sense that you're part of the family, they don't treat you like you're not one of their own children."

Participants described entering foster care and feeling completely disowned and abandoned. They felt like no one wanted them and they didn't really belong anywhere, which was often a result of not only being moved from their home but also their school, circle of friends, and other familiar aspects of the life they knew.

"I think a lot of foster children feel disowned because they're constantly moved from family to family and from school to school and it leaves them feeling like no one wants them and they're just palming them off to other people."

In a related theme, foster children in successful placements felt like they were **loved**, not only by the primary carer but by the whole household, just like any other member of the family.

"[The child feels] loved, wanted, needed, included."

Ex-foster children also described a good placement as one where they felt **safe**, where they had what they needed and had people to help them if anything went wrong.

"I think mainly safetywise, it [foster care] helps keep a kid safe and healthy. Which I think is the main ambition."

Ex-foster children emphasised the importance of feeling like they were **listened to** by their carers and caseworkers, and that they had some say in the decisions affecting their lives. This was particularly the case as children grew older and wanted to be informed about plans for their future and to have the opportunity to express their own opinions on the matter. Participants expressed frustration at being in placements where they felt like they had no **control**.

"If you don't know what's going on yourself and it's just going on between the carer and the caseworker that's OK, but eventually you get to an age where you want to know about the decision that's being made about your life."

"I didn't feel like they were listening to me. [...] I didn't have control. I couldn't do anything about it. I had to deal with it."

Also important from the perspective of the foster child is for a placement to be **stable**, where a child does not live with the threat of being moved at any time. Successful placements are those where the child stays in the foster home for as long as required.

"One that's fairly stable, that you're not constantly moving about."

"It's consistent, like it's not short-term, it's long-term."

"A successful [placement] is where you stay there for years and you're comfortable and feel safe."

Overall, participants described a successful placement as one where they felt **happy**; where they were not burdened with serious worries – such as whether they would be moved to another home again, problems relating to their biological parents or siblings, or being generally unsure about what would happen to them in the future – and where they felt secure, loved and as though they belonged in that home with that foster family. A successful placement meant that they could just relax, have fun and enjoy being a child.

"Happy and looked after and safe."

"Happy, loved."

2. Characteristics of Good Carers

Participants were asked specifically to describe the types of people that they felt made good foster carers. The answers given can be divided into the following areas: motivations for being a foster carer; the standard of basic care provided; the home environment, including the presence of foster siblings; past experience with children; and personal characteristics.

Motivations

First and foremost, participants felt that a carers' primary motivation must be a **genuine desire to help the foster child** and to treat them as a full member of their family. Foster children enter a foster home with feelings of abandonment and dislocation from their previous support networks. Their primary need is to feel like they are wanted and that they belong in their new home, and this is only achieved if the carers and other members of the household genuinely want them there. Foster children are very quick to recognise disingenuous motivations, so if carers do not have the interests of the child as their primary motivation, this will be very quickly identified by that child.

"Genuine care as opposed to some place where you're there for three or four months and you move on to the next place. It feels like they're just waiting to move you on..."

Individuals who had been in foster care not only talked about the right motivations for being a foster carer, but also emphasised that some carers are motivated for the **wrong reasons**. They were very quick to pick up on the carers who were primarily motivated by monetary incentives for caring for children, as opposed to the best interests of the child.

"[They are] just doing it for the extra cash. It's probably not much but there's that incentive they're getting paid to look after someone's child."

Participants also emphasised that the best carers were the ones that had an innate **enjoyment of being around and interacting with children**. They would actually like being in the company of children and did not feel that children were a burden in any way.

"More to the fact that they actually enjoy working with kids."

Good carers should not only want to do what is in the best interests of the child, but they should also make foster children feel as though they are loved. They have to have that emotional connection with the child, despite the fact that it may be a temporary arrangement.

"They show the love. [...] Us kids can see when someone really loves us."

Provision of Care

At a basic level, it was expressed that carers need to provide the **fundamental aspects of care** and do it well. Washing clothes, making sure the child has good personal hygiene, making sure they have the correct school uniform, making sure clothes are ironed and that the child is provided with healthy meals, were all mentioned as critical to a successful placement. One participant reflected emotionally on their personal experience of a care situation in which this was not the case:

“My school uniform, I was being picked on very badly at school because I had a very small t-shirt and only the one. I only got it washed only every two weeks and I wasn’t allowed to use the washing machine. They wouldn’t buy me deodorant so you had the hot sweaty days at school, you smell so I was classified as the stinky kid. My shoes had holes in them.”

Participants also described good carers as being prepared to **do the extra things** for their foster children that parents would not think twice about doing for their own children – things that take either a lot of time or money and can be quite draining on the carers over many years.

“They got permission from DoCS to take us on a [...] holiday around Australia.”

This is particularly the case for children that experienced health problems in their youth and required specialised care as part of their upbringing.

“I had a lot of problems myself. ADHD, I had reading problems, I needed glasses, I needed braces. I went to the doctors and had a couple of surgeries and stuff like that and they just treated me as family and they got the things I needed.”

In hindsight, grown-up foster children saw the benefits of **boundaries and discipline** being implemented by carers. While all children at some point push the boundaries of parents, this is perhaps more the case with foster children because they have an ongoing sense that foster carers are not their real parents and so do not have the right to tell them what to do. Participants acknowledged that they felt this way as a child and that at the time they resisted any disciplinary measures undertaken by the carers. However, they also acknowledged that in hindsight it was only through the persistence of good carers that they learned to abide by the rules of the house and live harmoniously under the one roof.

“That’s what kids in foster care need, boundaries. I found that when I was at a younger age and a lot of other foster children like me, they say that you’re not my parent so I don’t have to do what you’re telling me to do. They don’t see that role model figure, that stern hand type of approach. That’s what I think, that they need to set down rules and the child needs to do their best”.

Foster Siblings

In terms of the household environment, participants also commented on the presence of **foster siblings** (biological children of the carers). However, in this regard opinions were conflicting. On the one hand, other children in the house were seen to be good company for the foster child and enabled them to socialise and play with other kids rather than just hanging around the adult carers and/or caseworkers all the time.

“It’s better with the kids. It’s better because you’re not bored, you can talk to somebody, have friends, go off and play.”

On the other hand, it was acknowledged that having other children in the house can be a cause of conflict, particularly if the foster siblings are not supportive of having the foster child in the house. Tension can also result if the foster child feels they are not being treated equally to the biological

siblings or if the biological children resent another child taking the parents' attention away from them.

*"When there's another child in the placement it is always difficult. [...] All kids are the same, if you live with another kid and they're getting more than you, what are you going to feel? He got a new toy, where the f***'s mine?"*

It was acknowledged that the issue of foster siblings needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Foster children need to feel welcomed by all members of the foster family and know that they will be treated equally, in terms of rights and responsibilities, as the other members of the household. They need to understand the rules, routines and lifestyle of the household so they have realistic expectations as they enter the family. Similarly, biological children need to feel that the amount of love they receive from their parents is not diminished by the addition of a new family member.

Experience with Children

The one qualification or form of experience mentioned as essential for good foster carers was **previous experience with children**. This does not necessarily need to be experience with foster children; value was also placed on parents who had raised their own children through to adulthood. Participants indicated that even working in child-related industries, such as child care or teaching, could greatly enhance a carer's understanding of children and ways of dealing with them effectively.

It was felt that if this experience was present, then the carers were more likely to understand children and strategies to deal with difficulties or problems (for example, in relation to challenging behaviour or times of emotional stress) effectively. Experience with children also enables carers to **recognise typical child behaviour** at different ages, thus preventing them from blaming the foster child or labelling them as 'naughty' or 'bad' when they exhibit negative behaviours that are common in most children their age, for example, being deceitful or disobedient.

"[Experience] with foster kids, with their own kids. Even if they've come from working with children whether it be childcare, whether it be teaching."

Therefore, from the child's perspective, carers who had this experience were far better able to relate to children and were less judgemental and quick to dismiss the child as they were more likely to have a good understanding of typical child behaviour.

Personal Characteristics

Participants were asked to describe the personal characteristics of people who make good carers. Firstly, and as described previously, the best carers were described as being **loving and caring**. They are people who display love and caring to all around them and for whom the role of parent and nurturer comes as second nature.

"A good carer has to have the abilities of love and treating the child as their own child."

Children in care also considered **honesty** to be a key trait of good carers; honest to the foster child in terms of expressing any issues or concerns they have, and perhaps even more importantly, honest to

the foster care agency in reporting how things are going at home. In some cases, carers would present a picture of happiness to the caseworker when they called or visited, when in fact there was a lot of tension and conflict in the home.

On the other hand, participants reported that when a child raised concerns with teachers or caseworkers and the carer was confronted by the caseworker, the carer would convince them that the child was making up stories or exaggerating the situation and that in fact everything was fine. This scenario would lead to the carer being angry with the foster child because they felt they had made them look incompetent to others. Participants repeatedly emphasised the need to feel like they could trust what carers were saying and that the situation at home would be represented honestly to the foster care agency managing the placement.

"I think they don't want to look as if they're doing something wrong, or they've been caught out doing something. A lot of them can say: 'this kid has made me look stupid, now I'm not happy' and they can turn on the kid themselves."

In a similar vein, good carers have to be **good listeners and communicators**. Ex-foster children emphasised the importance of feeling that their opinion is valued and that they have a voice in the household and some say over their future. Equally, carers who took the time to explain their feelings and the reasons for decisions that affected the child were seen to be more effective than those who did not.

"You can get certain carers who just say: 'look this is the way it is, whatever you think doesn't matter 'cause this is what's right'. Whereas a good carer will say: 'look you're entitled to your opinion and I respect your opinion as long as you respect mine'."

Good carers were also described as being **committed** to the task of caring for the child and **persistent** in their efforts to achieve positive outcomes despite the different phases children go through and the challenges that come with them. A genuine commitment to riding the ups and downs to get through to the end was important.

"...if you're going to take on a young child, you gotta be committed. You can't say when the child grows up, it's no longer cute anymore, get rid of it."

Many reflected on their behaviour as foster children as being disrespectful and challenging for the carers, and recalled that despite this, their carers never gave up. They were grateful for such persistence, and expressed their regret for treating their carers badly.

"But I did, I treated her really badly. But when you're a teenager and you're in a really, really bad mood and you're really grumpy and you treat people like crap and you know it but you can't stop it. I was like that all the time."

Importantly, good carers in the eyes of children are those who are not too rigid in their approach and are **flexible** in the way they manage children. Carers who were overly strict in their rules and routines and did not leave some flexibility to account for different individuals in the home were seen to be less than effective in their role.

“...a bad carer seems to have an opinion and expect you to acknowledge their ideas and their rules where as a good carer will also want to know how you feel about a situation.”

Good carers were also characterised as being **easy going, not too serious** and didn't get too stressed about the little things in life.

“Like you can't be a foster parent if you're up tight, it doesn't work out.”

Importantly, from the perspective of the child, good carers are **fun-loving** and have enough time to spend with their foster children. Working was not necessarily a problem for the carer-foster child relationship so long as the carer was able to make the time to participate in meaningful activities with the foster child – for example taking the child out for a milkshake, going to the ice-skating rink or organising and being a part of family activities such as birthday parties or weekend barbecues. Good carers are also there enough to know when the child is having problems at school or needs to talk to someone or ask advice.

“...people that actually have time for the children. Ones that aren't focused on work, they might have a job but they will be there for the children.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, the best carers are those who show **understanding** for what the child has been through and **does not judge them** by the circumstances that lead to their being placed in foster care. Many foster children feel that they are either pitied by carers or labelled as bad or naughty children because of the actions of their parents. Foster children do not want pity, but they also do not want to be stereotyped because of their background. Good carers are empathetic to their situation and are also understanding of the need for foster children to have contact with their birth families.

“I guess that they're accepting about the fact that you had to [...] go and see [your birth parents] every so often, they were quite accommodating to that.”

“The person is empathetic for the young person's situation. It is quite hard being the young person going into a placement so they have to be empathetic.”

Overall

The impact on ex-foster children of being placed with carers who exhibited all the qualities described above cannot be overstated. Participants described how they felt when they were finally placed with good carers, and the difference this made not only to their feelings of security and self-confidence, but to their performance at school, their ability to make friends and socialise, and their general optimism for the future.

“...when I finally got a really great carer I loved it. I picked my grades up, I got better at school, I learnt how to dress myself properly, my hygiene got better because I was more confident with myself...”

3. Factors Relating to the Child

Birth Family Relationships

Other factors were suggested to be likely to influence the success of a placement. Participants discussed the complex nature of family relationships in any foster child's life, and the importance of harmonious **birth family relationships** in ensuring a successful foster placement. There was acknowledgement that every situation is different, though the common factor was that foster children want to be listened to when it comes to arrangements for contact with their birth families. For the most part, examples were cited where contact was limited or denied for children who wanted it.

"I know I only got to see my parents five days a year, which really sucked and it was supervised which also sucked. I reckon they should have as much access as they can handle without upsetting them."

"I haven't seen mine since I was three or four. I've heard a lot of stuff about them but I haven't been able to judge myself."

Some also acknowledged that foster children can be pressured into seeing their biological families even when they really don't want to.

"Certain caseworkers [...] want you to either contact people you don't want, or see people you don't want to see. But the majority of them, it's up to you what you want to do, but some can be pushy."

Participants also talked about how they felt that **supervised access visits** were of limited value because the supervisors watched them so closely – they felt as though on the few occasions they actually got to see their birth family they didn't really get a chance to connect because there was always someone observing them.

"I've had some really good supervisors and then I've had some like when we go shopping and you're in an aisle right and they are right behind you and they just watch you like you're some kind of criminal [...] ...they followed me in the toilet even when I was 16 which annoyed me as it kind of felt like I was getting babied."

Participants explained that when foster children go into foster care they are unsettled enough because they are being removed from their parents, and emphasised the importance of staying together with their **biological siblings** to retain some sense of family. For example, if presented with the choice of staying with carers they personally liked on their own, or moving to another foster home and being able to stay with their sibling, one participant stated they would 'obviously' go with their sibling.

"Definitely keep siblings together no matter what. They separated me and my sister. Definitely keep them together as much as you can."

Support

Caseworkers

Participants emphasised the importance of the responsibility of the caseworker to **check** that the child was safe and well in the foster placement. The caseworker was seen as the one who had access into the placement and the power to take the child out of that placement if it was not going well (as compared to, for example, teachers or others who might observe events occurring in the placement from the outside but had limited power to move the child).

“I think it’s that follow up, making sure they’re OK. Whether it’s a text message or an email or anything, it’s just important to hear because sometimes that caseworker is just that familiar face.”

In the case where foster children were having problems with their carers, the caseworker was often seen as a **confidant** with whom the child could communicate these problems.

“I think that [the foster child] should be able to contact the caseworker anytime and be able to voice concerns if things aren’t going well. Like if they’ve been put in an abusive place [or] somewhere that’s not the best place for them.”

Beyond this checking role, the role of the caseworker was dependent on the particular needs and preferences of the child and, in many cases, how well the placement was going. Some foster children had a very close relationship with their caseworker; in these cases the caseworker often filled the multiple roles of friend, counsellor and mentor. For the most part, more frequent visits were seen as positive by participants because it gave them an additional person to see and talk to on a regular basis.

“I found with [Agency A] I was put into placements and not being checked up on. With [Agency B] I had a caseworker come around either every two weeks or once a month to see how everything was going, take me out, have a chat with me, see where my head’s at, see if I need any help, anything I need at school, that type of stuff.”

“What I liked about [Agency C] is it was more personal, like the worker would come out to the house once a week or they would take you out after school to get a drink [...] it was good they were there and I could talk to them as opposed to [Agency D] who I’d see like once every 3 months.”

Others recalled far less interaction with the caseworker but noted that this was not a problem because the placement was going so well that they didn’t feel they needed their support in that way. Participants did agree that a good caseworker would be **intuitive** enough to know how much, and what type of support each individual child needed, and should be capable of providing such support.

“I guess when my sister and I were young they were probably there a bit more frequent but when we got older I guess there was no need for them really.”

Importantly, ex-foster children emphasised that one of the most important characteristics of their caseworkers was their **availability** when they needed them. They might not have needed them all of the time, but if the placement was not going well or they had concerns or worries, they needed to know that the caseworker was only a phone call away and would come and visit if required.

“She [the caseworker] always made you feel comfortable and that you could contact her if you needed to.”

Participants indicated that this was not always the case, citing high case loads and caseworker burnout as contributing factors.

“You would hope that they [caseworkers] are [available for the child] but I think that they constantly say that they’re under-staffed and overworked.”

Friends

Participants talked about the importance of their **friends** as a support network when they have been separated from their families. They explained that an even worse situation than being removed from their birth families was when they were placed in a different geographical location so they had to move schools, also losing their circle of friends.

Participants also described the importance of being able to socialise with **other foster children** because they could identify with the experience of foster care. This type of socialisation sometimes happened as part of respite arrangements, but also happened as part of organised activities such as week-long holiday camps. These types of camps served as an avenue through which life-long friendships were formed because, as described by participants, most of the children who attended were also in foster care and for once they felt ‘normal’.

“I still have friendships with people from [Camp X], some of my best experiences. [...] I used to ask people their situation and I met these two girls and they were not in care at all. I thought they were weird...”

“The one thing about foster kids is that we stick together because we know what it’s like.”

Age of the Child

Participants discussed the influence the **age of the child** had on the likelihood of the placement being successful, with teenagers being more difficult to deal with than younger children. Numerous participants reflected on their own challenging behaviour during their teenage years and acknowledged that if not for their carers’ patience and persistence the placement would have broken down.

“...I still have contact with my last foster mum that I was with and I was actually with her the longest [...] and the last two years I was really rude and quite disrespectful. I was unappreciative of anything and all I wanted was to get my way and I didn’t even care who got hurt.”

Moving Placements

Participants talked about the difficulties foster children face when they enter an unfamiliar home and attempt to adjust to what can be extremely different home environments; they often felt unsure and apprehensive about their unfamiliar surroundings. Participants emphasised the

importance of carers and foster families showing understanding and patience with foster children as they try to navigate their way through this difficult initial period.

“Depends on the situation of the young person but it’s a totally different environment for them and sometimes it’s not the young person’s choice either who they go to so they’re gonna be scared.”

“...once you leave your real family and go into foster care, it’s hard to get used to their family because you could have been brought up wrong. [...] you’ve got to try and get used to their family. They could be frightened that anything could happen to them.”

Participants also acknowledged the negative impact that multiple placements have on foster children, and the unsettling and destabilising effect of moving them from placement to placement. From the perspective of ex-foster children, a fundamental aspect of any good placement was stability and the resultant minimisation of subsequent placement moves.

“...it doesn’t do a lot for a child’s mental stability being moved around so much.”

Participants explained how the number of placement moves influenced the behaviour of the foster child, contributing to a vicious cycle of placement instability. Specifically, the more the child was moved the more challenging their behaviour became, and the harder it would be for them to settle into new placements. It is possible that this is seen as reinforcement and magnification of the abandonment they experienced when first placed in care.

“If they’ve had heaps of placements or homes then they’re definitely going to test the boundaries with their next set of foster parents to see how much the foster parents want that child in the house.”

4. The Foster Care Agency

Participants were asked a number of questions about the role of the foster care agency in the placement and what the child needs from the agency in order to ensure it is as successful as possible. From the child’s perspective, ‘the agency’ is really represented by the caseworker because most of the time this is their only point of contact.

Caseworkers

Role

First and foremost, caseworkers are held responsible for checking that the child is safe and well in the placement. Beyond that, the extent of a caseworker’s involvement in the placement and the role they play (e.g. friend, mentor, champion, counsellor) should be dictated by the needs and preferences of the foster child. Importantly, the child must feel that the caseworker is available to them if they need to speak to or see them for any reason.

Personal Characteristics

In many respects, the characteristics of a good caseworker are the same as those of a good carer. Participants described good caseworkers as being **genuine** – in the sense that they do their job

through a desire to help foster children, and also in the sense that they relate to the children honestly. One participant recalled finding out that their caseworker, who had been taking them out for milkshakes regularly after school, was being reimbursed by the agency for the cost of the refreshments. They recall being hurt by this because they had previously thought of the caseworker as their friend but on finding out about the reimbursement they felt as though they had been deceived.

“It wasn’t really that they [caseworkers] were bad, but they were fake. I sensed that they weren’t being real with me, they were just being, they were being over-the-top nice. They were way too excited to see me and it wasn’t genuine at all.”

The exceptional caseworkers were also described as being **honest** and **trustworthy**: honest in explaining to the foster child what is happening and why – particularly as they grow older and have more of an interest in decisions that affect their lives. Foster children need to be able to trust the caseworker and know that if they tell them something in confidence they would not tell others. They also need to trust that if the caseworker said they would do something they would follow through and make sure it happened. This aspect was particularly important for foster children as they expressed difficulty in being able to trust people after being put in a new environment.

“Someone you know you can trust. Someone you know that if you said something to them, they would listen to you and be willing to fight for you the whole way through.”

“...one time they told me I could tell them anything and they wouldn’t judge me or say anything and I told them something really personal when I was 15 and then they told someone else about it...”

Participants also felt that it was important that caseworkers were **understanding** of their situation and **non-judgemental**. In the same way that foster children often feel as though they are judged by their carers based on the actions of their parents, they appreciate caseworkers who acknowledge foster children as being their own person and do not write them off as a failure or bad because of their own or their family’s past behaviour and experiences.

“Someone that’s definitely understanding, that doesn’t judge as well but is supportive...”

It is important that caseworkers are **friendly** towards the foster children. If the foster child feels that their caseworker is a friend they are more likely to feel comfortable confiding in them.

“...most times if the caseworker is friendly and you can feel like they are your friend you can speak to them about anything you want.”

A caseworker needs to be a **good listener and communicator**. Ex-foster children reported that particularly as they get older, foster children want to know and have a say in decisions that affect their lives. The caseworker is seen as the person with the power to influence the course of these decisions, or when they do not have this power (for example, if the decision-making lies with the courts) the caseworker at a minimum can ensure the foster child is kept up to date with what is going on.

“I think between all parties involved there needs to be that open communication and the honesty and let them know why the decision’s been made even if they have no say in it...”

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with caseworkers that did everything ‘by the book’ and appreciated those who treated every child as an individual and would make an effort to be **flexible** in order to cater for their particular needs.

Participants reported that foster children expected their caseworkers would be reasonably **intuitive** when it came to the foster child and the placement generally. If the caseworker is doing their job properly and visiting regularly and communicating well with all parties then they should be able to identify when the placement is not going well. This should be the case even when the foster child is not prepared to express their discontent (for example, when they fear repercussions from the carer), or if the carer is not coping but is unwilling, for whatever reason, to communicate this to the caseworker.

“If you have that regular contact, you can generally tell if it’s not working out. If the caseworker does really take the time to do the follow up and communicate with the young person.”

Ultimately, participants acknowledged that the good caseworkers are those who are **patient** and **persistent** and who will stick with the child through good times and bad.

“Those with definite patience. Definitely with patience because it’s a long hard road for not only the foster kids but also the caseworkers and the foster parents and the birth families. There are so many people involved.”

Caseworker Turnover

A number of participants recalled a high turnover of caseworkers during their time in care. This was the case even within stable placements. This high turnover was viewed negatively by participants, who recognised the negative effect it has on children who have already experienced significant instability in their lives.

“I had about five different case workers. They rotated quite regularly.”

“I hate having different workers, it upsets me. If I’ve got one worker I want them to stay my worker until it’s the end.”

Participants gave a number of reasons for this high turnover but most commonly it was attributed to high workloads and burnout.

“I think there’s been a lot of shuffling around [...] that’s what happens, people burning out and people constantly coming in.”

“You hear a lot on the news that they get burnt out lots and they’re over-worked.”

Financial Support

Aside from the caseworkers' role, participants commented on other ways that the agency gave support to their placements. Firstly, while participants were aware that their carers received financial support (in the form of an allowance) for caring for their foster children, they did not have an idea of how much they were paid. There was a general feeling that the amount was not enough to cover all of the costs incurred by the child and that it probably still cost the carers a reasonable amount of money.

"[Carer A] was working and [Carer B] ended up taking up a part-time job. They both had jobs to keep us both there. I gather from that it isn't cheap and it does cost them a fair bit to look after the child."

Secondly, participants were aware that their agencies and/or Community Services had paid for, or contributed to, a range of other childhood expenses, such as gaining specialist medical treatments or paying for driving lessons. Some recalled receiving gift vouchers from agencies for their birthday or at Christmas.

"[Agency E] paid for my braces which was really good because I had shocking teeth."

"I've had an extremely good experience with [Agency F], they paid for my driving lessons, up to 10 lessons, did the same for my sister. They help put me through private school."

Screening of Carers

Participants were able to describe carers – either through their own experience or what they had heard from other foster children – that were not doing a good job. Generally, there was acknowledgement that most carers do their best for the foster children and are carers because they have a genuine desire to help young people. However, there was also a view that some carers get through the screening process when they clearly (in the eyes of the foster child) are in the role for reasons other than wanting to help the child. At best, they show little interest in providing anything more than what is required by the agency at a basic level and at worst they are abusive to the foster child.

5. Community Attitudes

Perceptions of Foster Care

Overall, participants do not believe that there is a good understanding of foster care within the general community. In their experience, most people were familiar with the term but did not have any appreciation of the complex nature of foster care or the different types of care arrangements, depending on the child's circumstances, that can be put in place.

"...short term foster care they do but I think long term foster care they don't. Once it gets past a certain time people think it's adoption."

Attitudes towards **foster carers** were not particularly negative but were confused. Participants described, from their experience, that people often seem perplexed as to why foster carers would take on that role.

"...why would you want to do that, they're bad kids, why would you let them in your house?"

In relation to the **foster children** themselves, participants unanimously agreed that community perceptions were negative. For the most part, the attitudes they had encountered fell into two main camps. Firstly, people pitied or felt sorry for foster children and assumed they had come from a traumatic background.

"Yeah, there's the stereotype of foster kids and backgrounds they come from and things like that, abusive parents and things like that..."

"I think people's perception is someone that's had a very troubled background."

Secondly, and more commonly, people automatically assumed that since foster children have come from 'bad' backgrounds and had questionable upbringings, they must be 'bad' also. Participants recounted many times they had personally experienced these attitudes.

"Foster kids they generally think are the ratbags that get kicked out of home and are the trouble makers but it's not necessarily always that."

"...they're probably disruptive, naughty little kids and their parents can't take it anymore and can't handle them anymore..."

*"...foster children have a black mark against them in the community. They say 'Oh f*** he's different, he's not on my level'."*

"I think the community in general don't understand, thinking she's a bad kid she's in foster care, that's not necessarily the case."

"...in my own experience, well you must be like that too. You've come from that, that's what you must be."

Participants noted that negative community perceptions towards foster children were due in part to negative media coverage that often links anti-social or criminal behaviour with children and adults who have come through the foster care system. Participants noted that the media exposure of foster care exclusively related to negative stories of some sort – for example, particularly severe cases of child abuse, or instances where authorities have not acted quickly enough to prevent tragic outcomes for children. Consequently, the participants were not surprised that the notion of foster care generally conjures up negative perceptions within the community. Participants did express a desire to see more positive foster care-related stories in the media and noted that many individuals who were in foster care as children go on to have successful and productive lives, but people in the general community remain unaware that this is the case.

"I often hear on the news that if someone has robbed someone or someone's going to jail for something, in the end of the news clip they put in that that person was a state"

ward or they were a foster child or whatever. It makes it look like all foster kids grow up to be those kind of people, and they don't."

Treatment of Foster Children

Friends

On the subject of childhood friends, participants described how as a child they experienced difficulty making and retaining friends or didn't have many friends at all. They attribute this to being moved around a lot and always being on the outside of established social groups; feeling insecure and lacking confidence in social situations; and also various mental and emotional health issues (for example ADHD) which made it difficult to form social relationships with peers.

"My sister had a few friends through school. I had no friends through primary."

"I never got invited to anything. I didn't really have many friends."

Generally, participants said they did not reveal their status as a foster child to many people. If others did learn of this it was usually through inadvertent means – for example, when they overheard discussions between the child and teachers, or when they enquired as to why they were visiting school counsellors. When peers did discover the foster care status of a participant, they typically did not know what the status meant and would need to ask a lot of questions in order to understand. Alternatively, peers would not ask any questions because they felt uneasy.

"I mean they've got books on kids having two mums or two dads and how that's now the norm. But there's never books on kids that are in foster care that can't live with their mum and dad for, not only because they're being abused but maybe they've been abandoned, they don't have anyone else that can look after them."

Participants gave many examples of being teased and/or bullied by peers because they were in foster care.

"...kids would be nasty, they'd be like, 'your own mother didn't want you'."

"I got the whole 'no one loves you'."

"I got a few hassles when I was in high school about it, from other people, other kids and even their parents."

It was noted that while friends could treat foster children differently and be nasty, it was often the parents of friends who expressed greater issues. They would discourage their children from socialising with foster children or in some cases ban them from seeing them all together.

"...one young person was really good friends with another girl and when it got out that she was in foster care the parents said 'don't associate with her she's a foster kid'."

"I even had this boyfriend once, I was 16 and his mum, when she knew, she actually thought the worst of me. She actually thought I was a skank or something. Like seriously because I was in foster care."

Teachers

Participants also recalled teachers treating them differently because they were in foster care. In some cases this was negative, with teachers automatically assuming that they were responsible for general bad behaviour in the classroom or things going missing or being broken.

"...one of the kids I was friends with opened his mouth and then the teachers would, you know if something went missing, "[participant's name] have you seen it?". They'd be straight away asking that."

However, others recall teachers treating them far more sympathetically than the other children because they were in foster care. Some also noted that foster children can be aware of this and use it to get away with things that other children might not get away with.

"If that young person's not doing too well at school some teachers might go out of their way to help them..."

"Sometimes they [teachers] are more lenient."

"They let me get away with more stuff. [...] It worked in my favour. [...] Teachers definitely were sympathetic to you so foster kids usually play on that, which is really bad and they don't admit it but it's true."

Employers

Participants had also experienced negative treatment from potential employers if it was revealed that they were in foster care as a child. This was the case, for example, where a job application form asked whether the applicant had had prior dealings with the Department of Community Services. In the interview the applicant was asked to explain the nature of these dealings and when it was revealed that they were in foster care as a child, they perceived a distinct change in the interviewer's attitude.

"I've even been turned down for job interviews because I was in foster care, because it was on the application."

6. Overall Assessment of Foster Care

Overall, participants did agree that when children cannot stay with their biological families because of abuse or neglect, foster care is a good alternative. Many recalled their own experiences and explained that in their case, they were better off having gone into foster care than remaining in the biological home. They explained that they, and other ex-foster children they know, did not have this opinion when they were younger as they desperately wanted to return to their birth parents. However, with maturity and on reflection they felt that foster care was the better solution for them in the longer term.

"I would have definitely preferred to be in care than to have stayed with abusive parents. [...] All kids want is to be with their mum and dad no matter what, but when you grow older like you understand how you should be treated and what respect is and what you deserve as a human being..."

“Probably a better solution. Foster care I think should be for the kids who really badly need to be moved.”

“Yeah, I think it’s a great idea, coz the kid’s just gonna run wild.”

Participants agreed that younger children need a close relationship with adults who can act as mentors and role models, and accordingly group homes or forms of independent living are not suitable. They described the value of the one-on-one support that foster carers can provide and emphasised how important this was, particularly for younger children.

“I think it’s better than putting them into group homes because putting them into group homes they’ve gotta compete with other kids to get their voice heard. Whereas putting them into foster care they’ve got the choice to form a relationship with somebody else other than other kids.”

Some individuals thought that there should be greater efforts to place children with kinship carers if at all possible, rather than automatic placement in foster care. Kinship care was seen to provide children with a far greater sense of family and belonging than placement with strangers in foster care – in the latter case, a sense of belonging is not immediate and would have to be established from scratch.

“I definitely think that kinship care or relatives should be looked in to more. [...] I’m sure if more searching was done, my father’s side would have been able to be found and they have told me that they would have taken us in.”

7. Recommendations for Improvement

Finally, participants were asked how they felt the foster care system could be changed in order to improve outcomes for foster children. The recommendations are consistent with many of the previous findings in this report and are summarised below.

Fewer placement moves

As discussed above, participants spoke about the negative impacts multiple placement moves have on foster children. Placement instability is unsettling and makes the child feel unwanted and unloved. There was agreement that successful foster care involved children being placed into one home and then staying there for the duration of their time in care.

“ With some foster children if they are able to get into a permanent placement very early on, it usually works out better for the child...”

More listening to kids

A common theme throughout the interviews with ex-foster children was a feeling that when they were in care they were not listened to sufficiently well by the people who were making decisions that affected their lives. They expressed a need to have caseworkers and carers genuinely listen to and consider their opinions, and if decisions were made contrary to the wishes of the child, that the reasoning be explained in a way that the child could understand.

A number of participants also emphasised that foster children often feel that if they do raise concerns they are unlikely to be believed because the carers are perceived by others in a very positive light – as ‘respectable’ members of the community. Participants believed that if there were different versions of events being told to authorities, in most cases it was the foster children who were believed to be lying.

“Try and get the best truth you can out of the child and let them know if you tell us something you’re not going to get into trouble for it.”

“...there was a young person who was being abused by his carer and when he spoke up about it the workers have come in and they’ve taken the side of the carer because she was a well respected person.”

More carers available

Participants suggested that the system would be improved if more people within the community were prepared to become foster carers. Firstly, this would enable foster children to be placed with suitable carers in the first instance and limit the placement shuffling that can sometimes occur before a permanent placement becomes available. Secondly, it would mean that more children who need to be removed from their birth parents could be, because the foster care system would have enough carers to place them appropriately.

Improved quality of carers

Not only did participants indicate that more carers are needed, but they also acknowledged that the general quality of carers needs to be improved. Many spoke of carers they knew who were exceptional in this role, and they also emphasised the difference these types of carers can make in a foster child’s life. However, while not common, there was also acknowledgement that some current carers should not be in the role. These individuals do not display any enjoyment in caring for children and do not have the skills needed to deal with foster children effectively. One means of overcoming this variability amongst carers is to provide carers with more training (essentially make it a more professional role) so that those who are not capable are recognised and eliminated from the system before having foster children placed with them.

Reduced caseworker loads

Participants were aware that caseworkers are responsible for a lot of different children. They perceived caseworkers to have far too much work and were quite cynical about the response foster children got from caseworkers when they had a problem. They emphasised that the system would be improved if caseworkers could give more attention to each foster child – particularly those who needed a lot of support – and knew that this could only be achievable through more funding, more caseworkers, and lower case loads.

“...it comes back to case workers have got such a high case load and they can’t give the attention to the kids that may actually need it.”

Participants also acknowledged that a lot of caseworkers seem jaded and to lack empathy for foster children – particularly those who had been in the role for a long time. It was suggested that improving the quality of the caseworkers was dependent on making the role more attractive to people – and this was again thought to be achieved by reducing case loads and increasing funding.

“Definitely giving case workers less workloads. I know that’s impossible but they also need to look at making being a case worker more appealing to people.”

“I think the longer they’ve been in the industry the less empathetic they become.”

More checking on carers

Participants agreed that the foster care system would be greatly improved for foster children if there was more checking on carers. Some spoke of their own experiences and recalled how the caseworkers rarely visited, and in some cases almost never did. They described how they, even as a child, knew that the carers were not doing the job they were supposed to be doing, but because no-one was checking on them this went on for an extended period, and in some cases, for years. In situations where caseworkers did visit the placement, carers could become completely different people during the visit and then change as soon as they left.

Even those participants who had not experienced problems in this regard could cite instances of other placements where lack of caseworker visits meant that inappropriate things were going on in foster care without detection. They all emphasised that even if things seem to be going well and the foster child has not made any complaints, the caseworker needs to visit regularly in order to ensure that everything is healthy for the child. Participants’ verbatim comments regarding the importance of caseworkers checking up on carers is provided in Findings Section 3 of this report.

Support when leaving and after care

An improvement to the system would be the provision of greater support after children had officially left care – for example, in trying to get loans, applying for rental properties, applying for jobs and more generally in navigating their life course in order to become independent. According to participants, the foster child can feel they have to get out of the house because another child needs to move in (either because the carers need the money or they want to help another child). Often the child has nowhere to go so experiences a period of homelessness. More support would help foster children who want to lead functioning and well-adjusted lives; to change their circumstances and become independent.

“When I left care it wasn’t all that good coz I didn’t have a leaving care plan or anything but I left in ’07 and I was homeless till ’09. Which was really, really bad and that basically destroyed me as a person.”

“I was lucky enough that my foster parents did help me with all of that and knew what I sort of needed to do. But I have heard that a lot of kids, they hit 18 and have been told nothing about how to get a job and how to apply for housing and things like that and they end up out on the streets...”

“I’m trying to take care of myself because I want to be better than what people expect me to be. I want to show the people who’ve shunned me my whole life...”

Relationships with birth families and siblings

In recalling their own experience many participants stated dissatisfaction with the way the relationship with their birth family was managed. Some spoke of being pressured to see family members when they did not want to, and others spoke of wanting to see them but not being allowed. When family visits did occur, foster children were often unhappy with the arrangements. This included not being allowed to talk to relatives in private, as occurred when carers listened in on phone conversations or because supervised access workers were in close proximity at all times during visits. Verbatim comments of participants in respect to this issue are provided in Findings Section 3 of this report.

Generally, participants did feel that it was important to allow foster children to at least know who their birth families were so that they could allay their curiosity in this regard. Given the knowledge of who they were participants felt they could make their own decisions about the level of contact they would have as an adult, and in some cases participants had chosen to have none. Others explained that they were only just starting to build relationships with their birth families in their twenties because they were never given the opportunity to do this as children. Participants also emphasised the importance of keeping siblings together if at all possible so that some birth family relationships could be maintained.

“Definitely keep them [birth siblings] together as much as you can, or if there’s more than two kids, keep two together and try and put them in a foster home together. That way it feels like more like a family...”

Let foster kids be normal kids

Participants spoke of feeling like they were unable to do the things that other children their age were allowed to do. These included normal activities such as going to parties, shopping or having sleepovers with friends as they required authorisation from the agency or Government authorities. This often necessitated some degree of disclosure of their personal situation, for example, to the friends and families involved. Participants expressed a desire to be able to do the simple things their friends did in order to develop and maintain social relationships and feel less like the odd-one-out.

“Probably allow children to go out and do things with their friends a bit more. Be a bit more like other kids. Allow sleepovers. If you’re too strict on them, on teenagers, they’re only gonna do things against your will anyway. [...] Give that bit more freedom and it will help the placement and make them less likely to want to move.”

Alternatives to respite care

In hindsight, participants understood the rationale for respite care. However, as children, it sent a clear message to them, which was: ‘you are tough work, we can’t really handle looking after you all of the time and we need a few days break from you’. There were suggestions that respite for carers could be better achieved through other avenues, for example, holiday camps, organised weekend

activities or sleepovers with friends – essentially putting less emphasis on the respite for the carers and more emphasis on the positive activity that the child was experiencing. Even the term ‘respite care’ was thought to imply some degree of relief for the carers because it refers to when the child is gone. It was suggested that this term, while perhaps appropriate for use between agency staff and carers, was not an appropriate term for use in front of foster children.

“They also do respite which is when someone else looks after you for the weekend because they want a break. No, don’t do that. That makes you feel like crap.”

Improved public perceptions of foster care

As described in Findings Section 5 of this report, participants felt that public perceptions of foster care and the people involved with the system are quite negative. They believed that outcomes for children would be improved if there was less of a stigma attached to those who had been in care as children. One way this was thought to be achievable through more positive media stories emphasising good outcomes for foster children.

“You don’t hear any good stories... [...] At the moment it just looks like it’s a crappy job with crappy pay, crappy hours. You get kids that fall back and stuff but not all kids are like that.”

“...if you can get kids out there that have been fostered and show them that hey, they have made something of themselves with the support.”

Government responsiveness to children in need

It was also suggested that, at a general level, Community Services needs to be more responsive to those children who need protection. For the most part, this suggestion was not based on participants’ own experiences but reported stories they had heard and media publicity regarding instances when government responses to children in need was lacking. On reflection as to how their own lives may have evolved had they not been placed in foster care, participants emphasised the importance of the government’s responsibility to help children who need protection and to provide a foster care system that offers children in need the best opportunities for healthy growth and development.

“If there’s an emergency call, [...] someone has to instantly go out and investigate in a day or two for the safety of the child. That’s the main thing I would change in the system to make sure every kid is looked after and we can have someone making sure.”