

Case study - Foster Carers Peep - with qualification units

A snapshot of one group session (Course Outcomes below)

"This is the best 90 minutes of my week – I always learn masses," Martin confides as we sit in the People Centre before the group starts. Matthew wriggles on and off his knee, then round behind his chair, as adults begin to arrive through the open door with babies and toddlers, buggies and bags. Matthew is two years old. "This is our 61st day together, and, yes, I'm the main carer," he continues. "I've never cried so much. I now understand so much more about my own feelings too."

Martin is one of fourteen foster carers who have been meeting for an hour and a half each week, over ten sessions. Today there are several babies in the group ranging in age from six to seventeen months old. It is 1.30 in the afternoon, and sun streams in through the windows.

Helen is running the group, and places some Topic handouts and other information for the foster carers on the table. At the other end, co-facilitator Sue has arranged a wide basket on a rug, strewn with picture books, sensory objects and things for babies to shake and roll. During the first half of each session, the carers have an extended talk time/ discussion with the Peep trainer (Helen), based on one of the Programme's topics. Meanwhile the other Peep practitioners played with the children in the same room, with activities and play that supported the learning in the sessions. During the second half of the session, the carers, children and practitioners gathered together on the floor to share a story and sing songs, with actions and props.



The older children move back and forth between their carer and Sue who sits on the floor chatting and playing with them; sometimes they are on a knee, sometimes exploring the room, sometimes tussling over an interesting object in the basket. The adults evidently know each other at this stage in the term, and the children are at ease with both Helen and Sue so there is a fluidity in the children's attention and focus of interest.

There is a general buzz of conversation between the foster carers, who know they can joke and confide safely. Helen asks them how things are going. She has focussed all the material for this course on the following **Personal, Social and Emotional Development** (PSED) topics from the Peep Learning Together Programme:

- Helping children feel good about themselves
- Making the most of routines
- Becoming 'me'
- The importance of relationships
- An introduction to ORIM [Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Modelling]
- Helping children understand and manage their feelings
- The importance of names
- The importance of support and encouragement

Today's session focus is on helping children understand and manage their feelings. There are ideas on the topic handout that act as starting points and information to be explored:

'The wide range and mixture of feelings can be very confusing for young children. Younger children can generally recognise basic emotions, such as happy or sad, but they may confuse fear with anger. By the age of four years, children learn that it is possible to feel mixed emotions.'

This rings so true with these carers. What emerges through the conversation and shared experiences is how the older children in their care have a real need to control their situations and their relationships. When things can be so unpredictable for them, they show their need to control through everyday things, like insisting on what to wear and when to dress. These are some of the little but regular challenges that it seems helpful to talk about today because they are interdependent with how the children feel about where they are and who they are with. Where children are up for adoption, the coming and going between different households affects their emotional behaviour.

Sarah is sensing this strongly about the child in her care but speaks generally about children in this situation and as an experienced foster carer: "They have a sense of loyalty to their parent which is difficult to manage, so they're often dealing with massive emotions."

"What do you do?" asks Helen.

"Reassure them; show them I'm there for them."

Similarly Martin says how much being a foster carer and coming to the group has helped him become aware of and articulate his own feelings. This is again emphasised in the topic handout:

'Talk about your own feelings... tell them when something makes you happy or upset, and explain why you feel that way. This will help your child to understand that changes in how we are feeling are a natural part of being who we are.'

Frank and his partner have between them fostered several children over the years. This afternoon he proudly displays his NOCN portfolio, full of their drawings and marks and his own reflections. Their smiles say it all.

Here foster carers are given the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and relationships with their children; what it means emotionally to welcome them into their homes and to have to say goodbye, and all the times in between. Finding the words is important - as they recognise their own emotions and help their children talk about how they feel. Coming together and sharing the challenges and successes of their role – and having these acknowledged - supports them both individually and also in their joint perspectives on their children's learning and behaviour. They become positive models in their children's lives, even where their time together may be brief. The foster carers who attended this course evidently felt a sense of group cohesion, participating in conversations about challenging and emotionally moving situations, where they could see their voices were heard, and their relationships valued in a non-judgemental way. This led to an openness about sharing and honesty about admitting feelings both in themselves and at home or with partners and with their looked after children. By having a safe place to discuss emotions and behaviour and how to manage these, the foster carers helped each other to gain a sense of perspective on their children's learning and behaviour.

Session snapshot by Alison Street, Peeple trustee, Sept 2019. Foster carer names have been changed.

Course Overview and Outcomes

'The subjects covered and the conversations that took place as a consequence helped me to understand my role and to make sure I was doing the best job possible' Foster Carer

This course aims to support the foster carers to:

- value and extend learning opportunities in everyday life
- improve the quality of the home learning environment
- develop secure attachment relationships with their babies and children
- gain an accredited unit based on supporting their child's learning and development.

Recruitment, funding and participation

The course was funded by Oxfordshire's Virtual School, Early Years team and Foster Care Team. This team has an overview of all the looked after children attending settings. The People practitioners recruited foster carers for the course via these teams, the Foster Carers network and the social workers with whom the foster carers regularly have contact. The number of children living with the carers changed over the duration of the course, but the carers can continue to attend.

The support and relationships within the group were very important to the carers, as with the previous cohorts. In keeping with their role as a combination of temporary parent and professional carer, they were particularly aware of the challenges and progress of *all* the children in the group.

Foster carers' observations of the child in their care became more detailed. They spent time discussing their children and offered support and ideas to other carers. They were extremely supportive of each other and discussed confidentially the challenges they are facing within the role. They also provided relief care for one another in a few instances which was an added outcome. They have arranged to meet outside of the group and set up a group to continue to support each other.

Having children present was welcomed by the foster carers:

'Brilliant as we don't need childcare, and can also put the learning into practice with the children's activities... It's a good interaction with adults and children together.'

'This is ideal for the children we care for. Although their presence can sometimes distract, it's in a happy way'

'Helen turns the group into a little family. We all keep in touch and look out for all our children when we're together'

Understanding more about children's personal, social and emotional development and how to support it

The learning in the group was put into action in the home. The carers in the group all said that, as a result of the group, they were more aware of the benefits of what they were doing at home, and did more of it:

'I took loads from this course – I was quite unprepared for looking after a child (despite my best intentions) but the things I learnt here helped me to understand and support him'

'The course has given me the theory behind the practice which helps me to look at what I do, and improve or tweak it as needed'

'PSED course content was very interesting and encouraged me to think about all areas of the subject when I'm dealing with my children'

'This course gave us imaginative ideas for supporting learning which can be built into everyday activities. They show that learning takes place from the youngest age and can be fun.'

Adult learning - Peep Progression Pathway

All fourteen foster carers completed their NOCN Level 2 qualification unit (part of the Peep Progression Pathway): *'Supporting Babies' and Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development as part of Everyday Life'*. They kept records of what they noticed and reflected on as the children in their care learn and develop.

'It has been great for learning, and a very good opportunity for support and cohesiveness as a group of carers'

Outcomes for children and children's voices

Both the Peep staff and the carers noticed many changes in the children over the weeks. As seen previously, the children grew in confidence in a group situation, and both their PSED and communication skills visibly developed. The children quickly became familiar with the routine and they joined in with the singing and story time; they especially liked the props and had favourite songs that they would ask for.

Conclusion

The Peep Training Course for Foster Carers provided a unique chance for the carers to participate in an accredited programme of learning which developed their own skills as a 'professional parent' and was of direct benefit both to the children who attended, and subsequent children that they may care for in the future. Having the children as part of the course made it more accessible and provided significant learning opportunities for all the participants. Another benefit was the support networks that were formed during the course.

The additional challenges of working with looked after children were met within the context of the group, where there was an open acceptance of the demands of meeting the needs of children who often have complicated backgrounds, and the emotional rollercoaster as children come and go from the carer's home.

The carers said that they valued the learning on this course because it could be applied to the foster children that they have or might work with in the future. Previous Peep courses for foster carers and their children used multi-age topics from the Communication and Language, Early Maths and Early Literacy strands of the programme; any topics can be used, to meet the needs and interests of those attending.

'Peep courses are always fun, interesting and thought-provoking'

'PSED course content was very interesting and encouraged me to think about all areas of the subject when I'm dealing with my children'

'I enjoyed the course, it is the third Peep course I have attended and I find the fun, informal type group much better for soaking up information.'

'The courses open your eyes to everyday common sense elements that otherwise may be missed.'

All the staff from Peep who were part of the course felt privileged to have learnt more about foster carers and their special relationship with the children in their care.

'Needed reassurance I was doing the best for my child – Peep provided this.'