

NSPCC

Feasibility evaluation of the Reflective Fostering Programme (RFP)



In partnership with

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Child Attachment and Psychological
Therapies Research

A partnership of

Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

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Introduction

The Reflective Fostering Programme (RFP) is a new group-based programme to support foster carers of children aged 4-11. It was developed by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF) in collaboration with the NSPCC

The development of the RFP follows calls by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and other organisations to help improve outcomes for children in care—many of whom have experienced early maltreatment and trauma—by providing better support to their carers (NICE, 2013; Luke et al. 2014). The programme consists of ten 3-hour meetings offered to a group of 6-10 foster carers on a weekly or fortnightly basis. The RFP aims to provide foster carers with practical ways to help build and maintain supportive relationships with the children in their care.

In line with best practice guidelines, the first stage of development has focused on piloting the programme, before moving on to a larger-scale evaluation. This involved training NSPCC staff to deliver the programme to four groups of foster carers in two local authorities: Sheffield and Gillingham. As this was the first time the RFP had been delivered it was important to try and understand what worked well about the programme and what could be improved. We wanted to find out whether foster carers would be willing to attend the programme and whether we could train NSPCC staff to deliver the programme. We also wanted to get some idea of whether it helped those foster carers who attended, including any impact on their relationship with the child in their care.


This evaluation was carried out by the Child Attachment and Psychological Therapies Research Unit (ChAPTRe) at UCL/AFNCCF.

Key findings

28 foster carers took part in the RFP between April and July 2017. As part of the evaluation of the programme, they completed a set of questionnaires at the beginning, throughout and at the end of the programme. In addition, both foster carers and facilitators took part in separate focus groups at the end of the RFP.

Recruitment to the RFP: There was a good level of interest among foster carers in joining the programme, and a high number of foster carers who started the programme participated for the full duration. Feedback from foster carers indicates that the biggest obstacle to attending was the level of commitment required (10 RFP

sessions of 3-hour duration on a weekly basis). However, once they began attending, they were motivated to carry on coming because they found the sessions helpful:



“I have been on a 10-week course before and I never stayed ‘til the end, I got 4 weeks... I was really apprehensive because I didn’t know if I was going to see it through to the end, but I did, ‘cause I enjoyed it.”

Training the NSPCC facilitators: Facilitators were positive about the training and support they received from the team at the AFNCCF. However, feedback from facilitators also indicated that they may need more support on certain elements of the RFP, and more work is needed on the development of a way of objectively rating whether facilitators are staying 'on model'.

Programme Acceptability: High attendance levels and positive feedback from both carers and group facilitators indicated that the programme was perceived to be relevant and beneficial. There was a strong feeling among foster carers and facilitators that the programme should be more widely available to foster carers. Feedback from foster carers suggested that they particularly valued the reflective component of the programme and the focus on recognising their own needs and emotions:

“I think we’ve noticed as well, we’ve been on quite a few courses and on all the other courses it is all mentioned that you must look after yourself, you must keep looking after yourself to be able to carry on but you don’t get any answers on how to do that (...) and I think that doing this course is the first one where we actually got, yes, we now know how to look after ourselves”

Foster carers also valued the group experience and social support that they gained:

“It’s also been good having a support network as well... so you come away feeling actually, yeah, people do understand. So, it’s the support, as well as the training, that has been really beneficial.”

Feedback was also useful in highlighting some issues that may need improvement. For instance, some foster carers and facilitators felt there was too much content to cover within the allotted time. They also suggested simplifying the language to make it more accessible:

“Mentalization sounds like a made-up word [Laughs], I mean, I did come to... I do use it now but at the beginning, all these university terms”





Changes experienced by foster carers who took part in the RFP: Although the number of participants was quite small, initial findings are promising, with statistically significant improvements in foster carers' questionnaire reports of:

- Their own stress level (as measured by the Parent Stress Index)
- Their foster child's behavioural and emotional wellbeing (as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire)
- How much they felt their self-defined goals were being met (as measured by a Goal Based Outcome questionnaire)

Although the research measures didn't detect any statistically significant change in the carers'

sense of competence and confidence, a number of important points came up in the focus group interviews. Foster carers reported improvements in several aspects of their life: increased understanding of self and others; reduced stress; a widened support network; and positive knock-on effects on the children in their care:

"I feel I can move forward now and I've got some tools that are actually going to help me manage the child better, manage myself better, and actually better outcomes for the children as well. I do believe that my kids have got a better chance after me doing this, I really rated it."

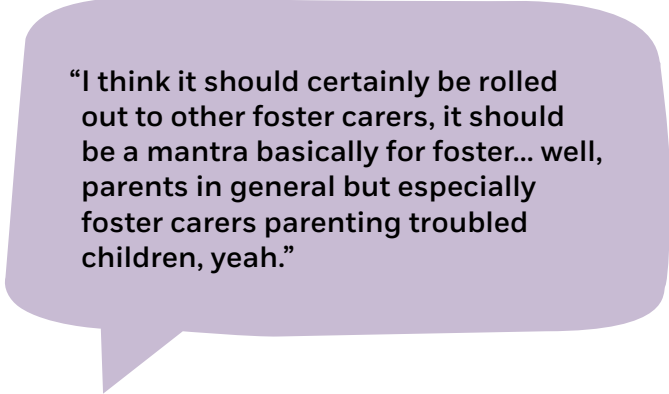
Conclusion

The Reflective Fostering Programme shows promise as an approach to supporting foster carers. The initial study suggested that:

- it is possible to train NSPCC staff to deliver the programme;
- foster carers were keen to attend and in most cases stayed with the programme until the end;
- the programme can have a positive impact on the carers' levels of stress and help support or improve the carer-child relationship

The study also identified some important ways in which the RFP could be improved, especially by reducing the amount of material that was covered in each meeting, giving more space for foster carers to share their own experiences, and by reducing the amount of 'technical' language that was used in the programme.

Once those changes have been made to the programme, further research will be needed, on a larger scale, to find out whether the RFP really can be an effective way to support looked after children and their foster carers.



“I think it should certainly be rolled out to other foster carers, it should be a mantra basically for foster... well, parents in general but especially foster carers parenting troubled children, yeah.”

A more detailed report on the findings of the study, *Reflective Fostering Programme: Report on the pilot and feasibility study* (Midgley et al., 2018) is available on request.