

**An illuminative evaluation of foster carers' experiences of attending  
an Attachment Theory and Practice training programme offered by  
a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for Looked After  
Children.**

By

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The thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

### Background

In 2006, a review of the research and literature in relation to the mental health needs of children in care, led to the rationale for providing training to foster carers and the network of professionals surrounding the child, offered as an integral part of the service provided by a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for Looked After Children (CAMHS/LAC) in the South of England. Individuals who are prepared to become foster carers need solid mental health training to successfully parent children who have experienced severe trauma and present with a range of emotional and behavioural difficulties (Dorsey et al 2008). Foster carers expressed the need for more information and support to improve their understanding of mental health issues when caring for their looked after child. In order to meet this need and given the dearth of evaluation within the literature regarding foster carers' experience of attending mental health training, this research study provides an evaluation of the process and outcome of attending training. Understanding the experience of the training from a foster carer's perspective was paramount in order to target support to carers to both prevent placement breakdown, deterioration in childrens' health and emotional wellbeing and for service development

The overall objectives of this research study were to explore the experience of professional foster carers before, during and after receiving training; to evaluate the knowledge gained from the training and explore their perception of how this affected their practice and identify areas of strengths and weaknesses of the training.

### Methodology

An in-depth illuminative evaluation for two cohorts of foster carers used a mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative) to explore process and outcomes; with the main emphasis upon the comprehensive collection of qualitative data. Quantitative data were collected in the form of two validated questionnaires, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1999) and the Family Impact Questionnaire (FIQ) (Donenberg & Baker, 1993), a knowledge questionnaire which was piloted and devised by the researcher and a satisfaction questionnaire devised by the local City Council. Qualitative data took the form of a series of semi structured interviews pre training, immediately post training and twelve weeks follow up training. A diary interview method was also used to complement the data gathered within the follow up interviews (Zimmerman & Weider, 1977).

## **Results**

Results from the quantitative questionnaires suggest that foster carers provide care for foster children in the South of England with a high level of need in relation to their mental health. Overall the SDQ results did not reach statistical significance but suggest a trend towards reduced perceived emotional and behavioural difficulties presented by children in their care. The FIQ identified that both foster children and birth children have a high impact on several areas of family functioning which continued over the twelve week period of the study. Increased knowledge was measured and showed statistically significant differences from baseline, which were retained over time and led to the reported positive change in foster carers' levels of confidence, ability to advocate for their child in a school setting and a sense of empowerment for foster carers.

An interpretive approach to analyzing data was used through the aid of thematic content analysis using the *Framework Approach*. Findings from the qualitative data revealed ten themes and suggested that foster carers experience training as a journey of awareness in relation to understanding the mental health needs of the children in their care.

## **Conclusion**

Illuminative evaluation has provided description and interpretation to unravel the experience of group training, whereby foster carers negotiate, choose and create their own learning in relation to individual needs. There appears to be a move away from foster carers being passive recipients of knowledge towards the proactive creation and sharing of knowledge within which carers from all levels of experience contribute.

Recommendations include a review of the existing package of training, involving the aid of foster carers input, to co-develop appropriate training programmes.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>ACAMHS</b> | Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service   |
| <b>AMED</b>   | Allied and Complementary Medicine                            |
| <b>ANOVA</b>  | Analysis of Variance   |
| <b>ASSIA</b>  | Applied Social sciences Index                                |
| <b>BME</b>    | Black and Minority Ethnic                                    |
| <b>BNI</b>    | British Nursing Index  |
| <b>CAMHS</b>  | Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service                   |
| <b>CBCL</b>   | Child Behaviour Check List                                   |
| <b>CINAHL</b> | Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Healthcare Literature |
| <b>CSA</b>    | Care Standards Act   |
| <b>CWDC</b>   | Children's Workforce and Development Council                 |
| <b>DAAT</b>   | Drug and Alcohol Action Team                                 |
| <b>DCSF</b>   | Department for Children, Schools and Families                |
| <b>DfE</b>    | Department for Education                                     |
| <b>DfES</b>   | Department of Education and Skills                           |
| <b>DH</b>     | Department of Health   |
| <b>EBP</b>    | Evidence Based Practice                                      |
| <b>FIQ</b>    | Family Impact Questionnaire                                  |
| <b>GCSE</b>   | General Certificate of Secondary Education                   |
| <b>IBBS</b>   | International Bibliography of the Social Sciences            |
| <b>IMD</b>    | Index of Multiple Deprivations                               |
| <b>KSF</b>    | Knowledge and Skills Framework                               |
| <b>LAC</b>    | Looked After Children  |
| <b>MTFC</b>   | Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care                       |
| <b>MRS</b>    | Modified Rosenberg Scale                                     |
| <b>MSC</b>    | Masters of Science   |
| <b>NHS</b>    | National Health Service                                      |
| <b>NICE</b>   | National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence        |
| <b>NVQ</b>    | National Vocational Qualification                            |
| <b>NMC</b>    | Nursing and Midwifery Council                                |
| <b>ONS</b>    | Office for National Statistics                               |
| <b>PACE</b>   | Playfulness Acceptance Curiosity Empathy                     |
| <b>PCC</b>    | Portsmouth City Council                                      |
| <b>PCT</b>    | Primary Care Trust   |
| <b>PICOT</b>  | Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Time          |
| <b>PSI</b>    | Parenting Stress Index                                       |
| <b>RAD</b>    | Reactive Attachment Disorder                                 |
| <b>RGF</b>    | Research Governance Framework                                |
| <b>SCIE</b>   | Social Care Institute for Excellence                         |
| <b>SDQ</b>    | Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire                     |
| <b>SHSSW</b>  | School of Health and Science and Social Work                 |
| <b>SPSS</b>   | Statistical Package for the Social Sciences                  |

**SSCI**  
**UK**  
**USA**

Social Science Citation Index  
United Kingdom  
United States of America

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## DISSEMINATION

**Presentation: ACAMHS** Special Interest group for Looked After Children. London 18<sup>th</sup> October 2010 (see Appendix 23)

**Presentation: Solent NHS** Celebration of Good Practice. Portsmouth 25<sup>th</sup> May 2011 (see Appendix 24)

**Presentation: Nurses Forum.** My Professional Doctorate Journey. Portsmouth 7<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that whilst studying for the Doctorate in Nursing at the University of Portsmouth I have not been registered for any other award at another University. The work undertaken for this degree has not been submitted elsewhere for another award. The work contained in this project report is my own work.

Word Count: 53,213

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to the memory of my baby sister Barbara who never got the chance to fulfil her ambitions.