

Foster care ONLINE



big issue

The best reward



Men's relationship with children has been marked by prejudice and media demonisation. But their equal involvement in foster care is now recognised as vital. Matthew Brown describes the changes taking place

For some men, getting a Mothers' Day card would be an insult. But when Jim Bond received one this year he knew he must be doing something right. It came from the 14-year-old he had been fostering for the previous four months, a boy who had thrown "all the usual teenage stuff" at Jim – staying out late, having a filthy room, refusing to clean up after himself.

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MODELS ARE
ESSENTIAL

One night he did not come home at all, so next morning Jim waited in a car park while the teenager decided whether or not to go back with him. In the end, he did.

"Some people might have shouted, or driven off, to assert their power," says Bond. "I just said: "OK, don't do it again". He was gobsmacked that I didn't behave in the way he expected."

When the card arrived a few weeks later, the boy had replaced "Mother" with "Jim". Then he added: "Thanks for doing both jobs and always being there."

"It was the best reward," says Bond. As a single male carer, being told he was a good mother as well as a good male foster carer was something of a triumph.

"Young men and women need good role models – not just good mums, but caring dads too," says Bond who, as chair of the Fostering Network, has publicly called for more men to become foster carers. "Children need to know men can show love and care. For many looked-after children this is absolutely crucial, because they've not experienced it before and they need good male role models to develop as rounded adults."

There are around 30,000 men currently fostering in the UK, 40 to 45 per cent of all approved foster carers. Nearly 80 per cent of them are part of a heterosexual couple.

The problem is, says Bond, fostering has traditionally been seen as a woman's job. Although attitudes to men and child care are changing, this is still the public perception, reflected in the practices, policies and publicity of fostering services. All too often, the men in a fostering partnership are seen as secondary carers whose primary task is to avoid putting the children, or themselves, at risk.

Awareness

Recently, however, male foster carers have started to raise awareness of their predicament. They say they are stereotyped as objects of suspicion and demonised as a potential risk to children, or treated merely as supporting partners in a foster family. Simon Newstone, a trainer and consultant in social care, has researched issues about male foster carers. "There are still a lot of attitudes about men," he says. "Things like, "men are useless with kids", "they're not good with babies", "they shouldn't be around teenage girls". There are still a lot of women, and quite a few men, who think it's unnatural for men to want to be around children.

"But without question we have children in the care system – both boys and girls – who need to be around safe, sound, nurturing men."

Newstone recently ran a workshop on male-friendly fostering services at a conference

for men organised by the Fostering Network Wales. More than 60 male foster carers aired some common complaints: social workers always asked to speak to their wives or fostering services only sent letters and payments to female foster carers. Others claimed training is often held during the day when they are at work outside the home, and that informal foster carers' networks are women dominated and hard to access.

"There are a huge number of male foster carers who aren't terribly visible," says Newstone. "Most people think of foster carers as women, for understandable reasons. But it means we overlook the actual and potential contributions of men to foster care."

According to Newstone, about three-quarters of fostered children have had an "inconsistent" male presence in their lives, and some have been abused. Rather than being wary of men, this means "we should be factoring men into their lives in a positive way", he says.

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"Yet, a lot of male foster carers are only brought in through discussions about safer caring and are left outside the wider conversations. They can feel very marginalised."

"The conference showed there is a real issue here," says Maria Boffey of the Fostering Network Wales, which organised the Cardiff event and is now thinking about setting up a male carers' forum.

"Things are changing," confirms Boffey. "Some services have changed their publicity to reflect a more male image, and some fostering services are running specific recruitment campaigns aimed at men."

Men's support groups are also important she adds: "They are empowering and they show men they have something unique to offer."

The family placement team at Caerphilly Council, for instance, runs a quarterly forum called Men Who Care. Around 25 male foster carers discuss safer caring and other fostering issues.

"It really helps having meetings in the evening," one member said. "In the past I felt I was leaving it all to my wife and sometimes it felt I wasn't valued or needed."

For others it is a good way to gain practical advice or emotional support; for some it allows them to discuss issues "from a male perspective" in a way they could not with their partners.

But Tony Azzopardi, the forum's facilitator, has a challenge for men: "Some men are to blame for being too passive and they let their partner make all the contact with colleagues and families. There have been instances on the phone when I have been handed over to the female foster carer. One focus of the group is to encourage our male foster carers to assert themselves."

When Jim Bond became a single male foster carer 14 years ago, one of the first in the country, it took him a full year to get approved. "I knew it would take a long time because I was breaking new ground," he says. "But I think there were hurdles in the background. There may well have been prejudice and there certainly would've been concerns."

Bond's determination to become a male foster carer came from his own "nurture need", something that is rarely acknowledged in men. Even now, lone male foster carers make up only a very small percentage of foster families, but more needs to be done to attract male foster carers of all kinds.

Bond backs Azzopardi saying male foster carers have a duty to speak up for themselves: "Now that issues are being raised, training will improve and opportunities for prospective male foster carers to meet existing male foster carers will increase", he says.

Prejudice

Men face prejudice on an even greater scale when they are gay. Jeff Leeks and his male partner have been fostering teenagers for nearly 10 years. "Many male carers feel they have to prove they are not paedophiles right from the start," he says. "It seems as if the suspicion is there, built in, and you have to disprove it."

"Sometimes, men are seen as a risk just by being men,' Leeks adds. "I've had people say, blatantly, that they don't think lesbian or gay couples should foster, that it's inappropriate. So clearly these undercurrents are there."

For Leeks, there should be better support from fostering services, particularly when male foster carers face false allegations or, in his case, receive homophobic abuse directly from a child.

"We have to get away from seeing men as ogres when it comes to children," agrees Bond. "Sadly, men in foster care do get accused, it happens too frequently and it can devastate families. I've sat for three hours trying to persuade an accused man to go out again. He was petrified everyone would think he'd abused someone."

Safer Caring, the Fostering Network's own guidelines, are crucial in avoiding the risk of false accusations. Newstone, however, believes the guidelines themselves could be part of the problem. "We want to encourage men to be more nurturing, not more fearful. But if a service flags up the issues first and foremost as big risks then it will just send men running. Or you will have a lot of male foster carers who never offer any physical care.

"Fostering is about developing relationships and trust, so safer caring should be a live thing, not a fixed thing. Kids in care should be able to have all the same experiences as any other kid, whether that's a bedtime story, rough and tumble, or hugs and cuddles.

"We should see safer caring as a set of tools, not a set of automatic rules. Otherwise, they become arbitrary and restrictive."

Caring should be based around the child's needs, their stage of development, the type of placement, and the nature of the relationship, he says.

Read to me

Storytelling can also help male foster carers find their role, a crucial step in building their confidence. Reading is an important technique for building confidence. Professor Hamish Fyfe, who runs the Storytelling Centre at Glamorgan University, believes reading offers a particularly useful tool to help men build caring, low risk relationships with fostered children.

"So many kids in the care system are storyless," he says. "There isn't anyone around to tell a story about them – "remember when you fell off your bike" and so on. And sometimes their own stories are embargoed for legal reasons.

"Engaging them through fiction allows you to talk about important issues without the risk or penalty of it being real. This is true of all children but it's particularly important for children in care because of the experiences they have been through."

A story is a kind of mediator, says Fyfe, a "third element" that eases the tension of a one-on-one situation. It can also indicate to the child that reading is not a gendered activity.

There are clearly several routes towards men taking their equal share in fostering. They range from a good book to better support and men speaking up for themselves. But ultimately they all lead towards children and young people enjoying a richer experience of foster care and emerging stronger and better prepared for the world.

That must be a goal worth working towards.

The conference in Wales threw up numerous suggestions of how to build men's roles in foster caring

How to make fostering services more men friendly

Training

- actively recruit more men to courses
- hold training outside 9 to 5
- establish men's support groups and days out
- make training men-specific

Recruitment and publicity

- make explicit reference to men

- include men in interviews

Social workers

- acknowledge the man's role
- involve men in care discussions
- don't just ask for the female foster carer

Policies and procedures

- make payments to allow men to foster full-time
- refer to male role models
- accept single male foster carers

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