Rupture and Repair: responding to disruption and loss within fostering

by Róisín Stewart, Andrew Kennedy, Marie Fitzgerald and Katherine O'Daly

Summary

According to Winnicott (1965), children need their mothers or primary caregivers to fail them in tolerable ways from time to time so they can learn how to live in an imperfect world. Through the experience of these ruptures in relationship and through the parent's subsequent attention to helping repair the hurt that the child has experienced, the child is helped to develop the capacity to experience and regulate their emotions and to develop coping skills and resilience. The relationship between child and caregiver grows. Foster carers have to be specially attuned to both the everyday and the exceptional episodes of rupture and repair which arise with the children entrusted to their care as they work to build a sense of safety, trust and belonging with their foster children.

The programme *Rupture and Repair: Responding to Disruption and Loss in Fostering* is a model of learning and support aimed at strengthening foster placements at times when they are likely to be most vulnerable to stress and potential breakdown. This article focuses in particular on two key practice principles underpinning the programme: reflective practice and joint learning for foster carers and practitioners. It also presents some outcomes of the pilot programme.

The programme provides foster carers and practitioners with:

- joint training where they explore together factors influencing placement stability and what works in safe care
- shared understanding of factors contributing to placement breakdown
- common, compassionate language to enhance communication, particularly at times of stress
- shared, experiential learning about therapeutic parenting
- interactions that help to build collaborative problem-solving and resilience

- protected space for reflective practice group process to help them to reflect on their experiences and embed the learning into their daily lives and work.

Introduction

"The start of our fostering journey was a challenge, with difference of opinion with social care staff. We felt we didn't have a voice or that our concerns were not warranted, but we overcame these challenges and learnt from our experience.
We have a new social care team with our foster child, who respect our concerns and are very understanding. From completing the programme I have a great understanding of their work and the challenges they face." (foster carer)

Rupture and Repair, Responding to Disruption and Loss within Fostering is an initiative of the Irish Foster Care Association in collaboration with Tusla–Child and Family Agency South Tipperary, Carlow, Kilkenny, and Tusla–Child and Family Agency Midlands.[1] It is a programme of learning, support and reflective practice for foster carers and fostering practitioners. The aim of the programme is to support the development of protective factors within placements which:

- promote placement stability for children
- increase foster care retention, and
- improve foster carer-practitioner understanding and communication around the factors and processes influencing placement breakdown and the safe care processes which can prevent it.

Following research of 'lived experiences' via the IFCA National Support Helpline; focus groups facilitated by Tusla–Child and Family Agency in South Tipperary, Carlow and Kilkenny; a review of evidence-based practice; and completion of a literature review, the Working Group[2] overseeing the development of the programme identified three key points of vulnerability of a child's journey through fostering. The programme focuses on supporting foster carers, and the fostering practitioners who work with them, at these three stages:

New foster carers

Foster carers early in their fostering journey - at one year post approval, at least one child placed in their care (Nesmith, 2020; Farmer et al, 2001)

Adolescence

Caring for children making the transition to adolescence or who are already teenagers (Sinclair et al, 2005)

Experience of placement disruption

Foster carers who have had complaints made against them and/ or have had experience of placement endings (Nesmith, 2020)

Why develop a programme focused on loss and disruption in fostering?

At the end of June 2022, there were 5,836 children in the care of the State. Of these children in care, 89 per cent were in foster care. Foster families are the backbone of our care and protection system for our most vulnerable children. While 1,397 new foster carers were recruited in the five years to 2022, 1,500 foster carers left fostering, meaning that the system is being depleted of its most important resource. Placement stability is being undermined with a reported increase in placement breakdowns (Tusla–Child and Family Agency, 2022).

The potential human and financial cost of foster placement disruption is widely accepted, with long-term impacts on all involved. Children in foster care are at risk of poor social, emotional, behavioural and educational outcomes based on their pre-care experience and the impact of the care system itself (Harkin and Houston, 2016). The rates of breakdown are estimated to be between 20 per cent and 47 per cent (Minty, 1999; Wilson et al, 2000). The effects of a placement breakdown can intensify and contribute to greater challenges in each subsequent placement for the child (Brown and Bednar, 2006; Rich, 1996). Children who experience multiple placements are at increased

risk of requiring placement in residential or secure care and of homelessness on leaving the care system. There is increased risk of loss of foster carers from the system (Buckley, 2002; Fahlberg, 2006; Wilson et al, 2000).

Interventions designed to address factors that contribute to placement disruption are essential in preventing children in the care system experiencing repetition of early developmental traumas of abandonment, loss, separation, and rejection. The need to more robustly support foster families in order to achieve greater placement stability for children is critical.

Main goals of the Rupture and Repair programme

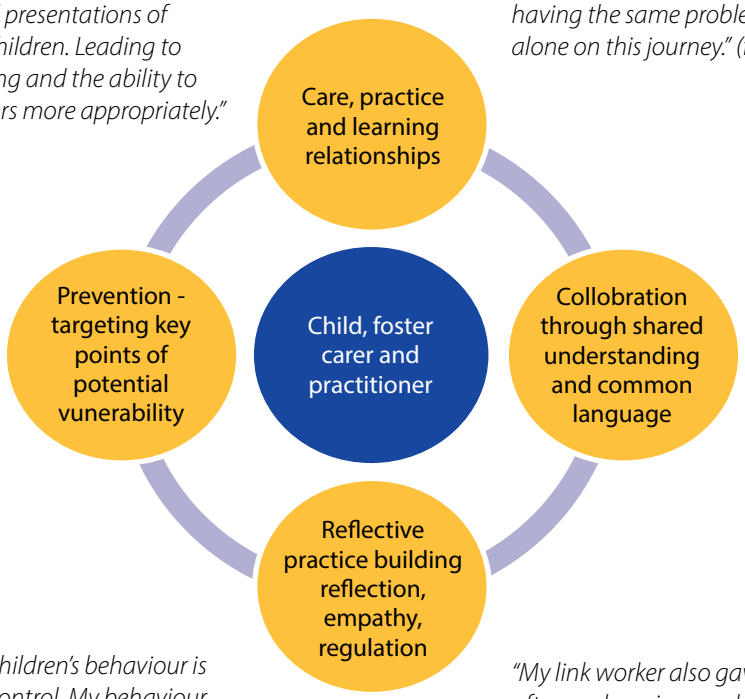
The Rupture and Repair programme has three parallel and interlinked strands. The principles underpinning the development and inclusion of strands one and two in the programme are outlined in more detail later in this article. The strands are:

1) Provision of Reflective Practice Process groups over five sessions to foster carers and fostering practitioners taking part in the programme.
2) Joint training for foster carers and fostering practitioners over seven modules.
3) Provision of a programme of support over eight sessions for foster carers who have experienced loss due to placement disruptions or experiences of allegations, complaints or welfare concerns. This third strand of the programme focuses on providing support and learning for foster carers to help them to process their experiences in ways which increase their capacity and resilience around stress and loss. The sessions are facilitated by a psychotherapist who works with the group to rebuild trust in the key relationships between the child, foster carer and the fostering practitioner. This process aims to reduce the negative impacts of such losses on foster carers' capacity to successfully foster children into the future.

The pillars underpinning the Rupture and Repair programme

"Invaluable source of understanding of the physical presentations of traumatised children. Leading to positive learning and the ability to read behaviours more appropriately." (practitioner)

"Other carers have experienced or are having the same problems so I'm not alone on this journey." (foster carer)



"Some of the children's behaviour is beyond their control. My behaviour and attitude has also a huge impact. Keep strong, keep going we are not getting it all right, but we're not getting it all wrong either." (foster carer)

"My link worker also gave me a call after our learning modules to chat about what we covered. I was lucky that my link worker was also on the program. We could chat about what was covered and get a better understanding on some of the topics." (foster carer)

Reflective practice – what, why and how

The what: what is reflective practice?

The phrase, reflective practice, was first coined by Donald Schon in 1983. There is a plethora of models in use in the health and social care sectors. These include Balint Groups (Balint, 1957) and Work Discussion Groups (Rustin and Bradley, 2008). The commonality of such models is a process for practitioners to reflect upon their practice and engage in the dual process of 'thinking' about what might be influencing what we are 'doing'. In the context of the Rupture and Repair programme, the participants were invited to take time, as a collective group of foster carers and social work fostering link workers, to reflect on their practice, to engage in learning opportunities and to receive

mutual peer-to-peer support (Lees and Cooper, 2019).

A key benefit of reflective practice is the opportunity to increase the capacity of reflective functioning (Fonagy, 2002) on the part of both the carers and professionals, supporting them to process the frustrations and challenges which inevitably arise from working with trauma. It is widely accepted that certain social care tasks, by their very nature, are inherently anxiety-provoking and emotionally charged and expose workers 'to considerable risk of being flooded by intense and unmanageable anxiety.' (Menzies Lyth, 1988:50). In the context of fostering, carers and workers open themselves up daily to unconscious processes such as projection or transference. The children we work with will project onto the adults involved in their direct care their most unmanageable fears and feelings, creating 'unconscious projective pathways' (Diamond, 2011:218). These pathways can become precarious spaces filled with unwanted and unprocessed feelings which can flood our pathways and result in us engaging in defensive behaviour, such as splitting and blaming, to avoid the 'psychic pain' (Canham, 1998:67) connected to our roles.

The importance of reflective spaces which integrate learning from both theory and practice, can counteract the unconscious transference and projections faced by the adults working with children in care. It is only by acknowledging these feelings together, in ways which help to alleviate shame, that we can help such children to feel safe enough to feel, to think and change. Otherwise, the temptation is to do as the children do: numb ourselves to the pain and pass the feelings on (Sprince, 2002).

The why

Reflective practice groups provide a 'thinking space' to assist the group members to understand and make sense of their own and others' behaviour, that is, how someone is thinking, feeling and their intentions, in order to offer containment and thinking for the child. Enabling a deeper understanding of such complexities may assist in minimising the emotional impact of working with trauma and the potential chaos it can generate. It may increase our capacity for attunement to the underlying feeling attributed to trauma rather than solely to the presenting behaviours. This in turn promotes empathic responses and trauma-informed practice towards the children we care for and the people we work alongside.

The how

At the design stage, the Rupture and Repair working group agreed that the reflective practice groups should begin and end the programme, highlighting the importance of the reflective functioning as part of the work of fostering and caring for children who have experienced developmental trauma. The remaining sessions were interwoven throughout the duration of the programme and were scheduled to follow the psychosocial educational modules. This sequencing promoted integration of theory to practice, promoting curiosity and strategies for collaborative problem solving, and resilience for key personnel within the foster care system.

The reflective groups consisted of two foster care groups, one in each region, and a combined practitioner group. Each session encouraged the group to reflect on, explore, and think about aspects of learning modules and the implementation of the learning into their practice and/or experiences.

The sessions helped in the development of a mutual understanding of the learning material and prompted the group members to put any insights gained into practice and to embrace a common therapeutic language to describe experiences and interactions encountered with the dynamics between children, the carers and the professional network.

"I found the Reflective Practice Group after the learning modules very beneficial to chat about what we learnt and hearing of life experiences from other foster carers." (foster carer)

The learning modules

When developing the Rupture and Repair programme, facilitators were cognisant of the value of collaboration, the importance of a common understood language and the value of social workers and foster carers learning in a collaborative way alongside each other, in both a theoretical and experiential sense. To this end, the modules consisted of theoretical elements, group discussion, breakout rooms and experiential learning pieces.

Lotty et al's review of psychoeducational group-based interventions for foster carers and adoptive parents highlighted three core elements common across interventions reviewed. The interventions 'emphasised the growth of the carers' knowledge and understanding of the impact of trauma on children's development and its influence on carers' capacity to care for children with trauma-related difficulties. Reflective

engagement in a groupwork experiential process helped carers develop awareness and become more reflective to provide a child with trauma-informed care. Thirdly, the interventions shared a strong skills-based component to develop carer skills to provide trauma-informed care as a response to child difficulties and self-care skills as a response to the impact of looking after traumatised children.' (2021:203). The review also highlighted the benefit of practitioner parallel training to ensure consistency.

The Rupture and Repair programme also aimed to develop carers' and practitioners' understanding and awareness of the impact of trauma on children, especially on brain development, regulation and relationship formation, and of the impact of caring for children who have experienced trauma on themselves as caregivers and practitioners and the development of self-care strategies.

The White Paper *Care Matters Time for Change* (2007) highlights a lack of understanding of the respective roles, duties, responsibilities and organisation of the different agencies and professionals. Their use of different language in relation to their work may lead to poor communication, misunderstandings and frustrations (Department of Education and Skills, 2007). The White Paper recommends developing a common language and for service providers to train together. The Alternative Care Practice Handbook (Tusla–Child and Family Agency, 2014) recognises the importance of positive working relationships between social workers and foster carers. Feedback from foster carers who have taken part in St Bernard's Children's Services Therapeutic Fostering Support Programme[3] shows that foster carers believe it would be very beneficial for social workers to receive, or be aware of, the training that they themselves receive while they are part of the St. Bernard's programme, so that a common language and understanding of the theoretical concepts could be used and understood by all with bona fide interests in the child's life.

The Rupture and Repair programme also focuses on the meaning behind the child's behaviour, and how understanding the underlying need helps the carer to respond more appropriately and, over time, lessen the necessity for the child to display this behaviour in the hope of having their needs met. Conway (2009:26) proposes that 'although social workers and foster carers could not all be expected to undertake a child psychotherapy training, a version of this type of training practice would enable social workers to understand, for example, that the state of mind of the foster carer could be a communication about the child rather than an indictment of the carer which is how one split in the system can often manifest'.

Having training programmes that bring departments and services together is a good idea: developing a common language cannot be a bad thing (Conway, 2009). The 2017 briefing paper *A National Consultation with Foster Carers and Social Workers* advocates for the creation of 'opportunities for social workers and foster carers to train together' (IFCA and Tusla–Child and Family Agency, 2017:12) to improve collaboration and communication. It further suggests the creation of 'opportunities to share good practice across the fostering system.' (ibid:21). It also suggests that the 'continuation and strengthening of collaboration is a central theme underpinning' the improvement of the care experience for children in foster care in Ireland (ibid:23). Lotty (2021) proposes that developing collaborative working relationships between foster carers and social workers is important as they impact on fostering stability and thus, the outcomes of children in foster care and that these relationships become particularly important when difficulties arise.

Social work education and training should include knowledge and skills development pertinent to foster care (Cosis et al, 2014). Joint training can be important to signify partnership working (Kirton et al, 2007). The value of such training on the Rupture and Repair programme became very evident as the participant group got to know each other better and trust developed. When looking at the difficult topic of allegations it was very beneficial for both parties to get a real sense of the impact on the other of allegations. It was especially enlightening when a social worker took the risk to be vulnerable and recounted the overwhelming anxiety and sadness she experienced while driving to a foster carer's home (whom she had great regard for) to inform them of an allegation that had been made against them. This example highlighted the valuable nature of joint training and the very human and vulnerable nature of both roles, and that the roles contain many commonalities.

The experiential learning approach of the Rupture and Repair programme was seen as essential to support learning and skills development. Throughout the modules, the facilitators utilised discussions, video, real-life examples and a play section to reinforce learning and build on foster carer and practitioner skill sets. The play section was specifically highlighted by carers as being very worthwhile. Play is soothing, calming and regulating in the moment. It provides a medium to connect with the child and further develop relationships. As well as helping to rebuild the traumatised brain (Perry and Hambrick, 2008), it helps the adult to connect with their own inner child (Berne, 1964),

encouraging us to get out of our thinking brain and into our creative brain.

"I have gained a greater understanding on attachment theory and how the absence of secure base can impact on children in care but by providing children the right support, care, love and in their own time children can develop trust in their care givers helping them to feel safe, happy and overcome their childhood experiences." (foster carer)

Conclusions

The outcomes of the programme were evaluated with foster carers and practitioners using pre- and post-questionnaires. At the end, participants also took part in focus groups to capture their narratives about their experience of the programme. These are reflected in their words throughout this article.

The members of the Working Group also took part in a focus group at the conclusion of the programme. It highlighted the process the Working Group had undergone in its role in developing the programme. Meeting regularly to review and support its progress was in itself a reflective group process akin to that undertaken by the participants. This weaving of reflective practice throughout the various layers of relationship in this microcosm of the fostering system – foster carer, practitioner and programme management – is thought to have contributed to the programme's positive outcomes.

On communication

The Rupture and Repair programme focuses on the commitment to co-ordinated and meaningful communication between professionals and foster carers to create a therapeutic community around the young person (Simmonds, 2010; Axford, et al, 2006). Thirty-seven per cent of foster carers reported good communication with their social work team prior to participating in the programme. This rose to 71 per cent post-programme. The words of the participants underscore the importance of this:

"I have gained a greater understanding into the complex roles we all have in supporting children in care and fostering families. I think it is vitally important for the fostering professionals, fostering link workers, social workers, etc, to have a relationship with the foster carer and fostering family as when times are challenging and difficult for whatever reason, if the relationship between both is strong it is easier to overcome challenges in a safe way." (foster carer)

"No one is perfect. We need to work as a team." (foster carer)

On reflective practice process

Feedback received during the reflective practice group sessions indicated that this process was a felt experience by the group members. Both foster carers and practitioners described the key learning from the reflective process for them as "shared experiences" which links to Lees' and Cooper's (2019) mutual support benefit. They also valued the opportunity to hear the "different perspectives", the practitioners being challenged to see how events are experienced from a carer's perspective and vice versa. This promotes our capacity to tolerate the possibility of a dual reality where two perspectives can co-exist, minimising the risk of the social defences of splitting and blaming culture, which in turn promotes mutual respect for all parties involved in the challenging work of fostering. These sessions provided them with a "time to digest" – an opportunity to make sense of the emotional entanglement that can result from working with high concentrations of the chaos and inner turmoil that trauma can cause.

One finding of the programme evaluation is the value of including some joint reflective practice group sessions for foster carers and practitioners together. As well as having separate sessions to attend to experiences particular to their roles, foster carers and practitioners may benefit from coming and being together in a reflective space to hear each other and process the emotional impact of fostering together. This can help to promote empathy as well as the integration of the learning into day-to-day relating and practice, weaving and strengthening a safe network of connections around the child.

On self-care and support around loss in fostering

The experience of the loss of a sense of self arising from the unique and challenging roles of foster carers and fostering practitioners is an important learning from the programme. Because those at the frontlines of fostering and child protection have the need to remain resilient and in possession of the capacities and resources to respond appropriately day in and day out, safe, supported spaces for both to reflect on and explore the complex emotional experiences associated with caring for children who have experienced developmental trauma, are essential. These reflective spaces allow for compassionate communication in response to experiences which, if left unprocessed and unsupported, can lead to conflict, stress and burnout. The participants said:

"I've grown more aware of the importance of self-compassion. Making sure to give time every day for calming, relaxing activities or even to reflect. It has also encouraged our foster child to take part in breathing activities and yoga. Even though she is three, she loves her yoga." (foster carer)

"Self-care is important. To care you need to have a sense of self, and be in a good state of body and mind care. The need to be patient, open minded and have understanding which will help a child to self-regulate. Never be afraid to look for help …" (foster carer)

On joint learning

The opportunities for joint training and shared learning that the programme offers are essential for strengthening collaborative relationships between foster carers and practitioners which is considered an important factor in determining positive outcomes for children in care. The sensory processing, emotional regulation and therapeutic parenting modules are reported to be very beneficial for better equipping them in their roles. The participants said:

"Different approaches to supporting children in our care, especially Dan Hughes's PACE Model. It has made a huge improvement in supporting our foster child." (foster carer)

"I have gained confidence." (foster carer)

"100 per cent very worthwhile. I have learnt so much that will empower me going forward in my role as a link worker." (practitioner)

The Working Group is currently beginning an evaluation of the Rupture and Repair programme at one year on, linking with participants to reflect on the long-term impact of participation in the programme on the stability of foster placements and the wellbeing of the key fostering relationships. So, the process of exploration and reflection continues.

About the authors

Róisín Stewart

Róisín is Director of Services at St Bernard's Children's Services in Fethard, Co Tipperary. She is a qualified organisational consultant who has worked in the social care field for the past 22 years, 14 of which have been at senior management level in St Bernard's. In

her role as a manager, Róisín is acutely aware of the complexities of the task facing health and social care practitioners in their work with children and families. Her experiences in this field have highlighted the importance of providing staff support through the provision of a reflective space where practitioners are facilitated to discuss the impact and the challenges of their task and roles. Róisín is a member of the Rupture and Repair programme Working Group and she facilitates the Reflective Practice Groups with both foster carers and practitioners in the Rupture and Repair programme.

Andrew Kennedy

Andrew is Social Care Manager at St Bernard's Fostering Support Service. Andrew has been a practicing residential social care worker since 1999, with experience of working with children from a therapeutic community and psychodynamic perspective. He has practiced in a therapeutic high support unit for children under 12 with insecure attachments, with adolescents in a medium-term unit, as well as managing a medium-term unit. He has managed the Fostering Support Service since it was established in 2014. Andrew is a member of the Rupture and Repair programme Working Group and he facilitates a number of the learning modules in the Rupture and Repair programme.

Marie Fitzgerald

Marie is a member of the Rupture and Repair programme Working Group. She is a social care leader with the Tusla–Child and Family Agency Fostering Assessment Team for South Tipperary, Carlow and Kilkenny. Marie has over 30 years' experience working with families, children, young people and foster carers. Her current role involves working with foster carer applicants in assessment, particularly Section 36 applicants, supporting them through to approval along with providing support to birth children. Marie is involved in initiating and planning recruitment for new foster carers. Marie is the Training Coordinator for developing, organising and running of training for foster carers in her Tusla–Child and Family Agency area. Another aspect of Marie's role is to co-ordinate placements for social care students across this area. Marie and a social work colleague have recently developed a support group for birth children in South Tipperary with the hope of extending this to children who foster in Carlow and Kilkenny in 2023.

Katherine O'Daly

Katherine is a member of the Rupture and Repair programme Working Group. Katherine has worked with children and families for 32 years in a variety of community, therapeutic

and court settings, including therapy services for children affected by sexual abuse and those who have experienced bereavement. She also worked as a Guardian ad Litem from 1995 and was a member of the Barnardos Guardian ad Litem panel for 10 years until 2019. Since joining IFCA in 2020 she has worked in Learning and Development, coordinating the IFCA curriculum of ongoing learning events for foster carers and fostering practitioners. Katherine holds a MA in Psychology (Clinical Specialisation) and a M.Sc in Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy.

Endnotes

[1] The development and pilot of the Rupture and Repair programme was funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth under the What Works Scheme.

[2] The Working Group was set up to inform, drive and oversee the programme. Chaired by the National Services Manager of IFCA, it included frontline representatives from the two Tusla–Child and Family Agency areas, along with IFCA staff and expert trainers who were contracted for the programme through a tendering process.

[3] These foster carers undertake a Certificate in Therapeutic Foster Care with Carlow College, St Patrick's.

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