



It's hard enough as a foster child without being demonised

Dawn Foster

The issue of young people in foster care only seems to make headlines when the story is negative. They and those who care for them deserve better

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One of the less welcome side-effects of the news in 2017 is that terror attacks now seem routine: the responses less drawn out, life quickly reverting to normal for those unaffected. After the failed Parsons Green bomb, the tube system swiftly ran again, and people in the capital carried on. Few demanded more powers be granted to the government - Donald Trump's call to switch the internet off aside.

But when arrests began, and it emerged that two of the suspects had shared a foster home, several TV news producers contacted me, as one of the few journalists who grew up in care, asking whether I would argue that the fostering system needed "tightening up" in an unspecified way. It's unclear what answer they expected - their lack of familiarity with the intricacies of the

fostering system hampered any attempts at elucidation – but my arguments weren't deemed snappy enough for television clips.

Fostering seems to get into the news only when there is a political agenda in play. In August a Times story that an English-speaking Christian child had suffered distress because she had been placed with Arabic-speaking Muslim foster carers generated a great deal of heat and remarkably little light. The facts were vigorously disputed by the responsible local authority, Tower Hamlets, and any semblance of how the fostered child had actually been treated was lost in the crossfire. Too often prejudices about fostering dictate coverage rather than an attempt to make an objective judgment about what fostering means to the children who go through the system.

If the Parsons Green suspects are found guilty, the fact they were fostered will in no way be the cause of their crimes, but the circumstances that led to placement could indeed be a possible factor in their vulnerability to radicalisation. Children don't tend to end up in foster care without trauma. The myriad circumstances that lead to children needing alternative parental figures are hard at any age.

If your parents gave you up, the fear that compared with most children you are unlovable is impossible to avoid, however staunchly social workers and foster parents deny this. If you are placed in care against your parents' wishes, the unfairness and uncertainty over whether you can return lingers. For unaccompanied refugees, the anxiety is worse; not knowing if their parents are alive or can ever rejoin them adds to the trauma of fleeing home and nation.

Children in foster care can be difficult because their backgrounds are often difficult. The uncertainty of foster care can also hamper efforts to create emotional bonds with foster parents: why build up trust and affection in this new family when you have no idea how long you will stay? Children in care often seem distant, because of the fear of revealing emotion and attachment: you daren't show your hand for fear the object of your desire is suddenly snatched away.

It's this trauma and fear that make children in care so vulnerable, both as teenagers and as adults leaving care. On leaving care, they are much more vulnerable to homelessness: 11% of homeless people recorded in London in the first three months of the year were care leavers. A staggering 45% of looked-after children and 72% of young people in residential care homes have a mental health disorder, compared with one in 10 in the general population. Children leaving foster care and care homes are also four to five times more likely to attempt suicide as adults.

Mental health services are piecemeal and oversubscribed in the UK. Worse still, the type of intervention needed by many cared-for children is more intensive and proactive than that which is available. With local authority cuts and overstretched social workers, it becomes ever easier for children to slip through the net. When they do that, they become targets. Many of the tales emerging from grooming scandals conform to similar patterns. Perpetrators, often working in the late-night economy, target teenage girls who are often in the care system or known to social workers. The victims are frequently young people with complex parental relationships and issues with authority: girls who found either that their parents didn't care where they were at night, or had foster parents who were ignored when they raised concerns. These are issues requiring mature thought and sensitivity.



Penelope Jones receives her MBE for fostering from the Queen in 2010. Photograph: Lewis Whyld/PA

The girls suffer a double bind: they are vulnerable, and thus easy prey for men seeking to exert psychological control, and their vulnerability and history prompt value judgments when they complain to the police or local authorities. The fact they have little self-esteem and a considerable amount of psychological baggage is what makes them targets for grooming gangs, but this leads to dismissal of their concerns by those tasked with their protection. Not being the perfect victims leads to their abuse continuing with tacit approval. If children in foster care feel abandoned and unwanted by the adult world when they are placed in the care system, the response to abuse these girls experience only reinforces that belief.

If the two men arrested in connection with the Parsons Green attack are charged and found guilty, questions will inevitably be asked about the fostering system, but they need to be of a sort that helps rather than harms a system under pressure. “They’re all children - it doesn’t matter if they’re sky blue or with pink dots on - they just need to be loved,” said Penelope Jones, the foster parent unwittingly drawn into the Parsons Green case. She and her husband, Ron, have fostered 268 children since 1970, and received MBEs in 2009 for their efforts.

The Joneses know that what binds these children together is their need for care and love in the face of trauma, loss and abandonment. But they will also know the challenge: the vulnerability that can cause these children long-term damage. There’s no obvious sign that the system needs tightening up. Ordinary people do a difficult, essential job, for comparatively small reward. They surely deserve our support.

. Dawn Foster is a Guardian columnist

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