

Episode 26 | Building trust between children and their carers transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, the podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering kinship care. We asked children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello to everyone watching. I'm Jo Francis, CoramBAAF's Publishing Manager. And today I'm talking to Lauren Fernandes, Bradley Kemp and Eva Sprecher about their involvement in creating our latest children's book, *Where did my dinosaur go?*

The book is about two young meerkats moving to live somewhere new and learning to trust new people. It's ideal for children in, for instance, foster care, kinship care, private fostering. But the meerkat situation is unlabelled, so it has broad appeal. We've published two author interviews so far that explore the book and how it came together. Both can be found on the comeback website in this third and final interview with the team, we'll discuss what it was like for those with experience of being in care, to be involved in the book's creation. So welcome, Lauren Bradley and Eva, would you like to tell us a little about yourselves?

I'm Lauren. And I live in Dublin with my husband and my daughter. I'm expecting another one now and I was in care between the ages of ten to eighteen/nineteen-ish. Before I went to uni. So yeah, a little while.

I'm Bradley. I've been in care from from when I was a young age and went into care roughly about the age of six. I came out, just like a couple of weeks before my 18th birthday, which is when I'm on to semi-independent living.

The one that I had built up with my carers at the time was like it was one of those ones where you don't forget I was going from different foster places and saw. The many different ways of how different carers do different things, and it wasn't until I got to my last placement and I wasn't with them for too long. I was with them for about 1-2 years maybe, and then obviously I had to move on due to post 18 and moving on. But yeah, now I've moved up near Surrey way with my partner, and we're expecting a little boy next month.

It's all getting very exciting now. Congratulations in advance for the happy events to both of you that we've heard from Eva previously about how the book came from a research project on foster children and learning to trust. So Laura/Bradley, what was it like being involved with the project? And either you can start.

It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I've spent my whole life thinking about what could happen, and to come to this—making a book for children about what it's like being in care and how to build trust—means so much. Coming from someone who was in my position, getting it out there to share and be heard is really nice. When you're able to use that and help other people, whether it's their first time going into care and they need a little help, or a carer needing help understanding their foster child, it works both ways. It's just really nice to know that I've been a part of making that happen.

It's been my absolute dream to illustrate a children's book. It's always been a part of my life and an outlet for me. I've been building up my professional artist profile for a while now, so to have this happen is amazing. I always joke that if I've been in care, it's great because it led to this wonderful opportunity. It's amazing that I've been able to do it, especially for people and children who were like me. My best positive care experience was actually at the end of my journey. I just think how different things could have been if more resources like this were available. It's so exciting that it's out there and that I got to be part of it.

We really appreciate the passion you both put into the project.

I just wanted to add to what's been said by Lauren and Brad already. The book couldn't have existed without both of them. I wouldn't have even thought of the idea of a children's book on this topic if it wasn't for Lauren's dream. Even though you said, Lauren, this is something that happened to you, I think it happened to all of us, and that's how the project came to be. The same with the story—Brad, it was you who came up with the core idea. Without either of you, this couldn't have happened. Even though you talked about it being an exciting opportunity for you, the pleasure was all ours to work with you. That's what made it happen and made it exciting.

As the publisher, it was definitely exciting for us to be involved. It's always great when we can put out a book that we think will really help. Brian, you've previously shared that you were keen for the book to show how important it is to build trust between a carer and a child in care. From your experiences, do you have any tips on how to build this trust? I guess some might be in the book.

I can give you a few examples, but I'll stick to the key one. As Eva and Lauren are aware, Paul, one of the other people involved, was my last carer. He and his partner worked so hard to get me back on track at school and keep the right mindset. They taught me to do everything to the best of my ability. It took a while, but after about six months or a year, I realised I could trust Paul. There was an incident during an outdoor adventure day organised by KCC. I went with an older foster lad, and we had a little argument that made me uncomfortable.

Paul didn't want to pick me up because he knew I would regret not staying. He told me he would wait in the car park all day just in case I wanted to come back. He waited over six hours in the car park, and when I went to the car park at the end of the day, he was still there. That was when I realised I could trust him. He and his partner did their job flawlessly. I can't say a bad word about my experience with them because they were the best carers I ever had. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be on the track I am now. They did a lot to guide me in the right way, and I'm very thankful for being a part of this.

What have you found from your time in care that really resonates with children about their foster carers?

I think having a close bond and being able to build up that bond between the carer and the foster child is key. If you're hesitant to talk to your carers in the first place, trust can't be built. Confidence is important on both sides. The carer needs to be confident to put their trust in the child, and the child needs the confidence to trust the carer. It takes teamwork to build that bond, and the only way trust will come is with that bond getting stronger. Even small activities like going out for a coffee or to the park can mean a lot. The more these activities build up, the more you'll want to be with them.

You know, you just come closer and form the bond. Obviously, I can't say what the best way is to do it. The experience I went through is slightly different from another child's experience. So, I can't sit here and say every single way, but the way I did it was by building up the relationship with the carers. I'd say the main tip to make that happen is to have confidence and don't be scared. I know it sounds scary at first when someone says "foster care." It's a daunting thing. When I first got into it, I thought I was never going to see anyone from my family again. But it does happen, and it can happen. No one knows what's going to happen in the future, but the experiences I went through showed me how trust works. If it wasn't for Paul, I wouldn't have a clue how trust works. He showed me what trust is, how to gain it, and the main rule of trust, which is that it takes a long time to gain trust, but it can be lost in a second.

Paul put that to the test many times. For example, he would tell me I could go out but be home by a certain time. If I was a minute late, the next time I went out, he would say I had to be home an hour earlier than the previous time. If I kept missing the time, the time I was allowed out got shorter and shorter until I was home on time. Then it would increase again. It was the same with my phone. When I first went to them, I had to put my phone in the kitchen on charge before bed because, as a teenager, it was a distraction. I had to build trust that I wouldn't be on my phone all night. We set it up by having a TV in my room so I could watch something before I fell asleep. I had to show that I could turn it off and actually go to sleep rather than stay up all night watching stuff. Over time, they allowed me to have an Xbox in my room and other things. Trust isn't a short-term thing; it takes a while to build up. How good

that trust is depends on how much confidence you have in each other. It's just that bond, confidence, and teamwork that make trust what it is.

That's really important to hear about. It's a real two-sided thing, isn't it? Definitely. The illustrations are always so important in children's books, and yours are really charming and very true to life, despite being about meerkats. What was the process like?

Illustrating the story, did you find it easy?

Yeah, well, it was kind of a team decision. I would draw something, and we would go back and forth. When we were developing the characters right at the start, we knew it was going to be animals. We always knew it was going to be animals. I find that kids relate better if it's less obviously about them. You don't want to misrepresent anyone or leave anyone out. So, we knew it was going to be animals. We thought about what sort of animals to use. We considered turtles because they have shells and exteriors, but we settled on meerkats for the kids because they can be really quite feisty and timid. They have broad personalities, like if you've ever watched Meerkat Manor.

Yes, absolutely. They've really got personalities.

Yeah, we just thought meerkats and capybaras. One of us mentioned that capybaras look quite motherly and cuddly. We settled on these animals quite early on. From there, it was an easy job for me because everyone gave such constructive feedback on the design, like whether they should wear clothes and things like that. It was a great process, and everyone else made it easy for me. It was nice to bring them to life.

Oh, fabulous. I really love their little facial expressions. There's this one bit where they're brushing their teeth, and it just cracks me up every single time.

I feel like real-life experiences of children definitely went into some of the character designs.

It really does show. They remind me of children, despite being meerkats. Did you feel that this story spoke to your previous experiences of being in care? Would your younger self have recognised what the story is trying to say?

I think so, yeah. Something I didn't realise until I got my copy of the book last week and was going through it with my own daughter is what a wonderful way it is to explain to my children what it's like to be in care. I pray they never will be away from me, but how can I ever describe what it felt like? This book is a great way to tell my daughters what it might feel like to be away from home. It shows how much it can resonate with me as a child because I was in a good foster place. I've moved so many times in my life, even as an adult.

Yeah, exactly. I just think it's lovely that at the moment she calls it the "sad meerkat book" because there's a sad meerkat on the cover. She might be a little too young to understand it now, but definitely when she's older, I'm really looking forward to having that connection with her. It's always been something I was thinking about, explaining to them what care is, what it means, and things like that. So, yeah, definitely. I can see my younger self, where I was so into animals and stuff, I feel like I would have enjoyed it.

Well, your daughter might be calling it the "sad meerkat book," but we know that the meerkats actually have a happy ending and are in a good place.

With its broad themes of moving, which we all experience, and the importance of trust, there are plenty of reasons why the book will hopefully make a difference to carers and children. It's currently Foster Care Fortnight as we're recording this, which is an awareness-raising initiative by the Fostering Network. Do any of you have any particular fostering moments that made a difference to you?

I think for me, it was the fact of how much Paul was actually there for me. I could have been miles away from where we lived. They lived in this area, and the area was about an hour and a half drive away. I could be over in that area and call, saying I'd messed up and used my last bit of money to get a drink instead of the bus fare. I'd ask if he could come and pick me up. He'd give me a "For God's sake, Bradley," but he would always come and pick me up. He was a man of his word, and anything he said he would do, he did.

There was another incident around my birthday. A celebrity was coming to the UK for a tour, and I had been going on for months about how I really wanted to see them. On my birthday, Paul drove me all the way from Kent to Essex just to see this celebrity. That was probably one of the best days I ever had, riding around on a scooter with a celebrity and being in a YouTube video. The fact that he drove all the way there and waited in the car park was amazing. I knew that no matter if I did something good or slipped up, he'd be there to either praise me or pick me up when I was falling. Having that security made me realise I could get through what I was going through at the time.

He made it very easy to understand that there are people around who care and that you can trust. It's not all doom and gloom in foster care; there are good parts. For some people, it does end up better.

Like I said earlier, it's weird that my most positive foster experience was right at the end. I feel in some ways it's a shame it wasn't at the start. When I was 17 or 18, I was having a placement breakdown and was always worried that I was too old and no one would want me. I thought I'd have to live on my own. I had a really good placement support worker who listened to me and

found me supported lodgings with who I now call my foster mum. She's my daughter's granny now.

If I had met this lady earlier, things would have been different. Some of the other positive experiences were with families who really worked hard to integrate me into their home and family. As a kid, you can really tell when you're different and not being integrated. That's a message I'd send to anyone who is a foster carer or thinking about fostering. It's so important to build trust by integrating the child into your family. Everyone's situation is different, but it's something I definitely noticed growing up in care.

Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you very much for talking with me today. That has been fascinating. Do you have any last quick messages for social workers on this subject?

Sorry, go ahead.

No, no, no. I was just saying it kind of leads on quite well. One of the most positive experiences involved the social worker and placement support worker. As much as this book is about trust between the carer and the child, the trust between the social worker and the child is so important as well. My message to social workers would be to work on that trust, and hopefully, lovely things will happen for you both.

Yeah, I agree with Lauren there, but also, obviously, my experience has been different. I've gone through both bad and good social workers. I've had ones that say they'll do stuff, and I'm waiting years, and I've had ones that say they'll do it, and bang, it's done.

Seeing the two different sides of what you can get out of a social worker, I think it's important not just for the social worker to speak to the child, but also for the foster carer to understand how the carer has built their bond with the child. The social worker might not understand that if they're just coming around to see the child. If the child doesn't trust or know them, and the only person they know is the carer, then the worker will need to get information from the carer. The child isn't going to want to speak to someone they don't trust or know.

So, I think it's very important for the carer and the social worker to talk to each other, as well as to the child. It's the link between all three. They need to come together, have a chat, and know where everything stands to build trust. This way, they can sit down one day and say, "Yeah, this is in place. This will be done. This is how and when." Then the child can know their plans, and it will be a much smoother ride.

What I found was that not knowing what was going on during the process of being in care is a lot scarier than it seems. There are people around who don't know what's going on, but not knowing what's going on in the care system is very scary. You've always got thoughts running

through your head like, “I could be moved tomorrow. I could go here or there,” and you just don’t know whether you’re going to settle.

Especially for me, before I found Paul, I went to three different foster homes. I was never settled for more than three years in a foster house, and I was moved around a lot, so I never really got the chance to settle. It just happened to be Paul who showed me and took me in the quickest. He was brilliant with all the other foster children too. They were happy, and I was happy. Paul has a lot of respect for me, and I have a lot of respect for him. If he were here now, he would be smiling because the two biggest things he always valued were trust and respect. He’s a great man and has done great things for everyone.

That’s a lovely note to finish on. Well, thank you very much to all of you. We really appreciate having those insights. And yes, again, thank you very much for the meerkats, Lauren. They are adorable. I’m hoping a lot of children out there will learn to love them as we have. Thank you very much. Thank you to everyone for listening or watching this podcast. Remember to listen to earlier episodes of our Call and Back Conversations podcast. You can find earlier episodes along with relevant resources on our website. To find out more about “Where Did My Dinosaur Go?” and to buy copies, see our online bookshop. Thank you very much.

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