

## Where did my dinosaur go? Author interview transcript

00:00:00 Jo Francis

Hello to everyone watching. I'm Jo Francis CoramBAAF's Publishing Manager. And today I'm talking to Amelia Goswell, Meryl Westlake and Eva Sprecher about their new children's book. Where did my dinosaur go? This is a charming picture book about moving to live somewhere new and learning.

00:00:20 Jo Francis

Trust new people. It's ideal for children in foster care, kinship care, private fostering, many other situations.

00:00:28 Jo Francis

Eva and Meryl, who helped write the book and headed the project. Our researchers at University College London. They're studying how we can support children in care with mental health issues. Amelia has great interest in the subject and she helped put words to the story. So hello everybody.

Thank you for joining me today. Eva, This is a charming book. I've gotta say. And it was a real joint effort. There's a whole author team here. Can you describe how did it come about?

00:01:03 Eva Sprecher

So it's been quite a long and exciting journey, long in a very good way. So some members of the authorial team, I got to know quite a while ago because they were interested and involved in some of the research which I've been doing.

00:01:23 Eva Sprecher

Around foster care and the relationships between young people and their foster carers, and I also knew Lauren through other projects we've done where she'd illustrated bits and pieces for.

00:01:39 Eva Sprecher

Projects about the mental health of care experienced young people, and Lauren had always said, you know, one day I would love to write a children's book about care and growing up in care because of her own experiences and I it sort of was a seed in my head.

00:01:55 Eva Sprecher

Of maybe one day we can.

00:01:57 Eva Sprecher

That happen and there came along the right project. This project about trust in the context of foster care, and we were funded really generously by the Beacon Bursary programme at University College London.

00:02:11 Eva Sprecher

To actually get some time to do this, to sit down with Lauren, our care experienced illustrator with Bradley, a care experienced young person with Paul, an experienced foster carer with Meryl, and later Amelia, who will tell us about her involvement and put together something really exciting.

00:02:31 Eva Sprecher

So it really came out of research. It came out of.

00:02:36 Eva Sprecher

Work we were doing at UCLA, so it is very research informed, but it also came through that meeting of people with those different experiences.

00:02:46 Jo Francis

That is lovely to hear. Actually, the fact that you've got that solid research base, but you've got real experience from young people who've been in care and foster carers themselves, which of course is so important.

00:02:58 Jo Francis

Well, Amelia, there are, as I've said, a lot of people with real life care experience or who are foster carers involved in the book. What benefits do you think this brought from your from your part in the in the project? Yeah. I mean, I I was coming in with not masses, amounts of knowledge about care, experienced children and foster caring and that kind of thing.

00:03:19 Amelia Goswell

I was brought in to kind of help put some words to the story, but that was the extent of really of my knowledge of the area. I think it would have been a very different book if it had just been even with kind of the research that that these guys have done and then putting it to words.

00:03:34 Amelia Goswell

It would have been a good book, but them coming in and adding.

00:03:38 Amelia Goswell

I mean the breadth of experience that they have has been completely invaluable in having care experience and foster carer involved just down to kind of.

00:03:47 Amelia Goswell

All the things about how children might be feeling and specific things to put in down to tiny little details of, you know, they might mess up their room when they first arrived. That was something that I'd never heard of. I wouldn't have thought about it to put in.

00:04:02 Amelia Goswell

Kind of. They might not like the environment that they're in and it's the struggles with familiarity and how can we put that into the book, which I think when we had test readers as well that were able to then come back in and say, well, that that really resonated me with me. That bit was something that I can remember from my first day going to a kind of a new home.

00:04:23 Amelia Goswell

That was the exact experience that was feeling that was really nice and we wouldn't have got that, I think without their input.

00:04:29 Jo Francis

Into it. No, absolutely. I mean it's it's really telling. I think you can tell in the book that these are things that people have actually experienced themselves. So in the book, the two meerkats, Mia and Kits moved to a new home. It could be foster care, although it's deliberately left unlabelled. So it can apply to a range of different situations. And I think that is an important point.

00:04:51 Jo Francis

The book has some important messages about how children may feel at this time when they come into foster care. What are some of the common things that children are worried about when they come into care from the experience of your authors?

00:05:05 Meryl Westlake

I guess Amelia sort of touched on some of it. I think a lot of it is that unfamiliarity when you're moving to a new place, you're leaving. What was?

00:05:12 Meryl Westlake

Your home and those people who cared for you and you're sort of.

00:05:15 Meryl Westlake

Transitioning into this new home, and I guess there's so many layers of what's unknown in that new environment environment. So I think that could be very sort.

00:05:24 Meryl Westlake

Worrying for children and what is it going to be like? And then even once you're there, not knowing what are the routines like? What are the rules? Things are kind of.

00:05:32 Meryl Westlake

Unfamiliar in many different ways, so I think those sort of different elements that a child's getting used.

00:05:38 Jo Francis

To it's the sort of things we take for granted, isn't it? Like what? What time you go to bed? Do you sit at the table to eat dinner? Do you not? Do you? Yeah. Like how do you choose what you're going to eat or?

00:05:40 Meryl Westlake

Yeah, definitely.

00:05:49 Eva Sprecher

This sort of thing, I think there are things which.

00:05:52 Eva Sprecher

It might even be just so hard to put into words like the whole different rhythm of a household it's like.

00:06:01 Eva Sprecher

You're like learning a whole new way of family and a way of living together, and I think it's really important to acknowledge that young people are doing that and.

00:06:11 Eva Sprecher

That's really hard for them, but also to acknowledge that foster carers are having to learn a whole new person and what they like and what they don't like and what suits them and what doesn't suit them and their sort of daily rhythms.

00:06:24 Eva Sprecher

And.

00:06:26 Eva Sprecher

That's a that's a whole journey as well. So it's not young. It shouldn't be that young people feel that they're in it alone. It should be something that foster carers and young people are coming together to learn about each other. But obviously for young people, it's going to be a lot more because the foster care knows that, you know.

00:06:43 Eva Sprecher

What time they normally have dinner and go to bed.

00:06:45 Eva Sprecher

So and yeah, and and also I think it's important to say that some young people might behave in ways that foster carers might find a bit hard to unpick. Like, why is that happening? What's going on there that young people may have?

00:07:01 Eva Sprecher

Develop these ways of being, because that's what helped them survive where they were living before or in the many places they've lived before. And and sometimes it can be really painful for a foster carer to be like I'm doing all the right things. You know, I'm trying my best. Why is this young person still messing up their room when I've made it really nice but?

00:07:21 Eva Sprecher

Being really curious about what's going on behind that.

00:07:24 Meryl Westlake

Is so important? Absolutely.

00:07:26 Meryl Westlake

I think that's something we tried to emphasise in the book that I know will come to, but that sort of.

00:07:31 Meryl Westlake

Curiosity from the foster carers and really thinking about what the experiences for the young person, but then being quite kind of understanding to themselves that like people were saying.

00:07:40 Meryl Westlake

We're in this journey together and it's a sort of it takes time. I guess that's like kind of a key message in the book. It takes time to build those relationships and sort of.

00:07:49 Jo Francis

Understand each other. I think you can really see that from your foster carer character, Becky in the book, where, yeah, it clearly it takes time. She's very patient about learning these new.

00:08:00 Jo Francis

Meerkats, who've who've come to have foster care but and it's it's a journey from both ways as you say. But yeah, it is about that curiosity and that patience, I think.

00:08:11 Jo Francis

So what are some of the practical things that foster carers like Becky in the book can do to help children in this process?

00:08:19 Eva Sprecher

It can be really hard to put your finger on exactly a set of rules that every foster carer could follow because every young person's different parenting, caring for every young person's different.

00:08:27 Jo Francis

Of course.

00:08:31 Eva Sprecher

But I think what we've touched on there about being curious, wondering.

00:08:36 Eva Sprecher

What is going on behind what I'm seeing on the surface? Like where is that coming from and and being empathetic about that, acknowledging that if there is behaviour which might sometimes feel really tough to respond to, that it's not just naughtiness, it's kind of. It's there for a reason, young people might.

00:08:55 Eva Sprecher

Have.

00:08:55 Eva Sprecher

Be behaving in those ways, because that's what allowed them to survive.

00:08:59 Eva Sprecher

And and yeah, really being consistent, trying to be really transparent about things. I know that, Paul who? There's there'll be another interview with him to watch, has loads of practical tips from his experience with foster care over the years. But yeah, I think.

00:09:20 Eva Sprecher

That consistency, doing what you're going to say, you're going to do being transparent and being available, being there and yeah, trying to get to know young person as early as possible. What food do they like? How do they want their rooms? Do they want a night light on all those little?

00:09:36 Eva Sprecher

Things really make a difference.

00:09:38 Jo Francis

And the media, I know there's a point in the book where the the meerkats, they're given peas in their spaghetti at the start and that this is a problem. And by the end of the book, we find that clearly there has been some discussion behind the scenes between the foster carer and the children and that this has been solved. And it was nice.

00:09:43 Amelia Goswell

That's a favourite line.

00:09:54 Jo Francis

To see that sort.

00:09:54 Amelia Goswell

Of little nod back to. Yeah, that was another thing that.

00:09:58 Amelia Goswell

Came out of, I think having a kind of Bradley and and Paul and Laura and having the anything that we've set up in the beginning.

00:10:04 Amelia Goswell

That the food wasn't quite how they liked, or the room wasn't quite how they liked. By the end, you know, spaghetti comes without peas and they're kind of tucked into bed that the way that they enjoy and even down to, you know, the kind of bird social worker figure is back at the end because that was something that came out that.

00:10:25 Amelia Goswell

It's nice to see that character come back and know that they're checking in and kind of test children. Readers were worried that this bird figure has disappeared and wouldn't come back again. So there was a few sort of.

00:10:36 Amelia Goswell

Bits that we've tried to resolve.

00:10:37 Amelia Goswell

All.

00:10:38 Amelia Goswell

With varying subtlety kind of towards the end of the book to the show. Yeah, it's not a linear thing. You know, Becky makes mistakes. Yeah. And she's not perfect, but she continues to try and interact with the children and will learn what they like best. And by the end, a lot of.

00:10:53 Amelia Goswell

Those things have been implemented, that's.

00:10:55 Eva Sprecher

And it's compromised in both areas as well because, say, taking the peas out of the spaghetti that's that's, you know doing what is going to feel really comfortable to mearing kit the meerkat that the brushing, the teeth, they still they get used to brushing the teeth and you see them later in the book just that becomes a routine so it's it's that balance of.

00:11:15 Eva Sprecher

What the foster carer is bringing, what the young person's bringing and coming to a middle place which feels OK.

00:11:22 Meryl Westlake

And this is a slightly different no, but I'm thinking that sort of practical things, I guess that you saying sort of getting to know what they like and don't like, but also in activities, I mean doing the sort of joint activities and I guess that's partly where link to, but this kind of.

00:11:35 Meryl Westlake

Came from as well as. It's something that can be done together and then starting those conversations because that's what we spoke about quite a lot.

00:11:42 Meryl Westlake

Is particularly related to the sort of booklet and including questions. It's really hard to have those conversations. And so I guess doing things like reading the book together and then being able to sort of open up that space so that.

00:11:55 Meryl Westlake

The child knows actually this is something we can talk about. These are really difficult things. But this is something I'm able to go to you and speak with. So sort of.

00:12:03 Meryl Westlake

When the foster carer or whoever the carer is sort of is able to name something and bring something up, but hopefully that then kind of says to the child this is OK, we can speak about this even though it's quite difficult to have those conversations.

00:12:15 Jo Francis

And I can see that that's clearly really important. Absolutely. And and a real reassurance to the child as well.

00:12:21 Eva Sprecher

And it's finding the right moment for that as well.

00:12:23 Eva Sprecher

Because.

00:12:25 Eva Sprecher

The first day is not going to be the time to open up that, that, that conversation. It's like taking all the toys out-of-the-box and then feeling like how are we gonna get this back in and for everyone to feel calm and ready for bed, but just being sensitive to young people's cues? We're not expecting foster carers to sit down with the book first time.

00:12:44 Eva Sprecher

So for every question in the book that that it's just something to build towards, perhaps exploring.

00:12:50 Jo Francis

Either I know you've got a particular interest in this in this subject. From your research. The book does talk about the difficulties children can have with trust.

00:12:59 Jo Francis

Do you want to tell us a bit more about that and how that?

00:13:01 Jo Francis

Comes.

00:13:02 Eva Sprecher

Into the book. Yeah. So we we know from.

00:13:06 Eva Sprecher

Research that if young people already anyone, has had a really difficult start in life with relationships.

00:13:13 Eva Sprecher

Which have been.

00:13:15 Eva Sprecher

Quite confusing or scary at times, and that can really affect the way that we trust other people. Maybe that will look like really not trusting people. Maybe it will look like trusting people too much and maybe not.

00:13:27 Eva Sprecher

The right people.

00:13:29 Eva Sprecher

What we explored in our research is.

00:13:32 Eva Sprecher

For young people who come to live in foster care, foster care come to live in foster care and have those experiences of.

00:13:42 Eva Sprecher

You know, maybe not trusting people very much with reason, because that's what they've had to do to to keep safe. Then how how does that change over time when they have a relationship with the foster carer and what we found were a few things so.

00:14:02 Eva Sprecher

Firstly.

00:14:04 Eva Sprecher

Over time, young people did find that they were able to trust more based on having those consistent relationships with foster carers who are available and and did what they said they were going to do and were emotionally warm and there for them. But that process was really gradual.

00:14:23 Eva Sprecher

And it wasn't a straight line. It wasn't just every month. There was a little bit more trust. Trust gets built and trust gets broken. And you see that in the book when.

00:14:34 Eva Sprecher

When the toys the dinosaurs get washed and that's a breaking of trust for me and kit with Becky, but then it can be built up again with that patience and and the last thing which we found in the research is that when that trust has built a little bit more that young people.

00:14:53 Eva Sprecher

Are then able to feel more comfortable and have better well-being in other aspects of their lives, making friends just feeling more secure. Maybe being able to focus on education a bit more and so that.

00:15:07 Eva Sprecher

That's that's kind of what the research showed us in in its early stages still, but but yeah, we tried to get those messages across in the book.

00:15:19 Jo Francis

I think that's really important. The idea that it's not just a linear process, it's not necessarily going to be a set of positives. You may step back, but you will then be able to step forward.

00:15:29 Jo Francis

Again, and and then that does free up children's brains, as you say, for being able to focus on other things, like education, their friends.

00:15:37 Jo Francis

That sort of thing.

00:15:38 Meryl Westlake

I guess that's what we're hoping in the book, although it's obviously targeted for children, actually, hopefully, as foster care is reading the book as well, you sort of see that in that these mistakes will happen, but actually it's OK you can sort of in some ways it's an opportunity to then repair and sort of do kind of new things to then speak about that and trust them.

00:15:56 Eva Sprecher

Especially because foster carers can feel.

00:15:59 Eva Sprecher

Often really hurt and confused. Why does this young person not trust me? And I've tried to do everything right? Umm but yeah, understanding that protective role of that not trusting people.

00:16:14 Eva Sprecher

Is. I know I've said it many times, but it's so important and and so foster carers can have a bit of grace for themselves to understand. You know, it's not. It's not that you're being untrustworthy. It's just gonna take time and they're going to be.

00:16:16

Right.

00:16:28 Eva Sprecher

Ups and downs.

00:16:30 Jo Francis

Yeah, for sure. And we've we've touched on the the booklet, the pamphlet that comes along with the book, it's a short pamphlet in the the back of the book, which has a range of prompts, questions, discussion points.

00:16:43 Jo Francis

To help spark discussion with children, really. So it's for foster carers or for social workers to really help make sure they're getting the most out of the book now. Even now you guys put this together and did a very good job, I have to say there's a lot of helpful prompts in here. Have you got any particular tips for the adults who are reading the book with the child to help them get the most?

00:17:04 Jo Francis

Out of the book.

00:17:05 Meryl Westlake

I think something I was saying about this before because I think there is quite a lot of it's not low, it's all broken down the information. But actually I think.

00:17:12 Meryl Westlake

If it was me, I think potentially for foster carers it could be beneficial to just have a look yourself initially sort of read the book and have a look at the pamphlet. Just because we provide sort of example questions that linked pages in the book, but before each of the questions we provide a

bit of information that kind of links Mia and Kit to children in foster care just to sort of make that.

00:17:32 Meryl Westlake

Direct link to try and help explain things a bit further and I guess in that sense it also links a bit more directly to the research. So we kind of hope that that might be quite helpful for foster carers to learn a little bit as they're reading that. So I would recommend having a look 1st and like Eva mentioned.

00:17:49 Meryl Westlake

See, it really depends on the child, what how they want to access the book. You might just want to look at the pictures. You might want to just read that. You may think some questions might be helpful, but you think actually at the moment they're not. So I think it's probably quite useful to have a look at that first and maybe then have a think what would be most appropriate for the child and sort of let them lead.

00:18:09 Meryl Westlake

How they might want to engage with that and whether it's the right time or maybe, you know in a years time when you've read it many times, you might want, you might want to then you know, have some of those conversations if you to add anything to that.

00:18:16 Eva Sprecher

Hope.

00:18:23 Eva Sprecher

No, I I.

00:18:24 Eva Sprecher

Think maybe just to say the book and all, all our advisors felt really strongly about this. The whole author team really wanted this to be a book which could be on any young person's shelf. Yeah. So it's not sort of screaming out. This is a book for a young person. Foster care only. There's a place for that. And it's really important.

00:18:45 Eva Sprecher

But it may.

00:18:46 Eva Sprecher

Be that as a dipping the toes in.

00:18:49 Eva Sprecher

You might just.

00:18:49 Eva Sprecher

Read it. It's just a book. It's just.

00:18:51 Eva Sprecher

A really nice.

00:18:51 Eva Sprecher

Story and then.

00:18:53 Eva Sprecher

It might be, yeah. Only over time.

00:18:55 Eva Sprecher

That.

00:18:56 Eva Sprecher

The links to young people's own lives might sort of get pulled out when it feels appropriate.

00:19:03 Amelia Goswell

You know, I thought it was really cool that there's quite a there's so many questions for each section that you can read it. I mean, hopefully hundreds of times and hopefully it'll be something that a child wants to read over and over and over again and every single time. Yeah, sometimes it will just be reading the book. But there's a different question that can come up each time.

00:19:19 Amelia Goswell

There's so many iterations of sort of conversations you can have off the back of that from quite casual.

00:19:24

Sort of.

00:19:25 Amelia Goswell

Do you have a favourite teddy of your own up to you know? Do you wanna have a bigger conversation about what makes you feel safe in the home and and that?

00:19:27

Yeah.

00:19:33 Amelia Goswell

Kind of thing.

00:19:33 Amelia Goswell

So there's such a range that you can range of conversations you can have off the back.

00:19:38 Meryl Westlake

Of and hopefully as well and just sort of start then by no means you have to follow the set questions that we've.

00:19:46 Meryl Westlake

Let in, hopefully they maybe also just.

00:19:48 Meryl Westlake

Help foster carers have some ideas of what they think might the child might be interested in but sort of linked to these sort of topics so hopefully it's sort of a bit of a springboard just to help think about how you maybe could bring that up with the child to speak to them within individual children and their individual circumstances. Yeah, definitely.

00:20:06 Jo Francis

Ohh well thank.

00:20:06 Jo Francis

You very much. This has been a fascinating.

00:20:09 Jo Francis

Discussion and thank you very much for coming in to talk to us today. Any final message for social workers when it comes to this subject or for foster children out there?

00:20:19 Eva Sprecher

I think it's just comes back to that sort of patience and really yeah, really trying to.

00:20:26 Eva Sprecher

Give time for these relationships to emerge. It's so hard for foster carers and for young people to build something out. Where previously there wasn't anything there and and lots of young

people we spoke to have said things like I don't even know what it's meant to look like. No trust. Where's the maximum there? How much trust is too much?

00:20:47 Eva Sprecher

And that's not something you pick up in just a month. And so, yeah, just really giving that patience and empathy for foster carers as well, who are often really, really trying their best.

00:20:59 Meryl Westlake

And I guess maybe something more broadly is something that felt so important to us throughout is just how care experience is at the kind of core of this?

00:21:08 Meryl Westlake

Book and everything that it sort of stands for and I guess we hope that also is communicated to children by the plus carers or through sort of social care professionals have sort of.

00:21:19 Meryl Westlake

Yeah, knowing that someone who is care experienced has created this and created it because they wanted to help other children in care. That feels really important. That hopefully will come through as well. If you're reading, even if that's a conversation that you have that feels quite helpful to sort of see.

00:21:35 Meryl Westlake

Figure school car experience doing something like this. So we hope that will also come from.

00:21:39 Eva Sprecher

This book as well keep an eye out for the interview with Lauren and Bradley. We'll be talking about what it was like to be carried through as.

00:21:45 Jo Francis

People working on it solutely and this is only the first interview that we've published with the author and illustrated team.

00:21:54 Jo Francis

Who, who wrote and illustrated? Where did my dinosaur go?

00:21:58 Jo Francis

Make sure to keep an eye out for our next interview with other members of the team where we talk with Paul Calder about his involvement in the book, his role as a foster carer, and his most memorable fostering moment.

00:22:12 Jo Francis

That interview will go out as part of foster care fortnight, so do look out for that. Thank you very much for watching.