

The Foster Carer's Handbook on Parenting Teenagers

Henrietta Bond

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About the author

Henrietta Bond is a writer, coach and communications consultant who has worked in the fields of adoption, fostering and leaving care for nearly 30 years. Previously BAAF's media and information officer, she became a freelance consultant and journalist, and worked on a variety of projects, including group work with care-experienced children and young people. She has written a number of guides and her trilogy of novels for teenagers, the Control Freak series (available from CoramBAAF) came out of her close work with children and young people.

Henrietta is passionate about giving children and young people a voice and helping them to develop resilience and self-esteem, and is keen to develop the potential of coaching to help young people have more control over their own lives. As a writer, she also helps young people find creative ways to express themselves. Henrietta recognises that she has as much to learn from young people as they have to learn from her.

Introduction

Being a teenager isn't easy, and it's a miracle how anyone gets through the turbulence of those difficult years in one piece – and that applies to parents as much as to the young person! Deciding to foster someone else's teenagers is an amazing thing to do, and you need to get all of the information and support that you can, so you can fulfil this role to the very best of your ability.

You may have done a great job in raising your own teenagers, or you may have done an equally excellent job in raising fostered children already in your household. But once young people who have experienced abuse, neglect, loss and separation reach the adolescent years, the usual teenage problems may be magnified as the young person's changing brain reawakens many of the traumas and painful issues from their past. At the same time, their already fragmented sense of identity can become even more fragile, and they are exposed to impulsivity and powerfully confusing feelings, on top of all the problems they have already encountered.

It is a big challenge to rise to, but helping a teenager to negotiate this complex time in their life is an incredibly rewarding thing to do. You will probably come out of it feeling that you've learnt a great deal about the importance of resilience – both for yourself and for the young person – and while change certainly doesn't happen overnight, you will be able to help young people discover new and more effective ways of dealing with the challenges that life has thrown at them. You will also have the knowledge that you have given them the best possible chance to embark on adult life feeling that someone has valued them enough to see them through the ups and downs of this major period of transition.

Who is a teenager?

Tony Hipgrave (1989, p40) writes that adolescence is a:

...complex and largely artificial phenomenon. It begins with a biological change, puberty, and ends via a number of social definitions – for instance, leaving home, leaving school or college, or getting married...Broadly speaking, adolescence can be characterised as a period of continuing

protection from the full blast of the adult world, on condition that the individual adolescent will progressively display increasing responsibility and independence. On the face of it, and from the adult's perspective, this seems to be a sensible and caring sense of affairs, but it should not be forgotten that the adolescent may experience the teenage years as frustrating due to the excessive prohibition on them in respect of activities in which they clearly have the capacity to engage, particularly sexual activity and paid work.

Hipgrave goes on to point out that in some societies there is no concept of adolescence, or that it lasts until an initiation ceremony marking the passage from childhood to adulthood. However, in our society, he states, there is no consistent point at which young people are treated as adults, as the legal age shifts confusingly, varying between activities such as drinking alcohol (18), getting married (18, or 16 with parental consent), remaining in some form of education (18), consenting to sex (16), travelling on public transport, watching films, or committing a crime.

For a young person who has had to “grow up” very quickly in order to fend for themselves or care for their siblings or a vulnerable parent, who has been exposed to sexual activity, violence, drugs and alcohol since early childhood, has had to steal to feed themselves, and has developed a nicotine habit to calm their nerves, many of these legal constraints can seem quite ridiculous. However, that young person may, at the same time, be way behind their peers in terms of emotional intelligence, and be unable to manage their own feelings and the social negotiations their contemporaries have long taken for granted.

In this book, we mainly concentrate on young people between the age of about 11 or 12 (when biological and brain changes tend to start) to around 18 or 19, because that is the age when many young people leave foster care. However, since the introduction of Staying Put legislation in England and Scotland, and the When I'm Ready agreement in Wales¹, there are now more opportunities for young people to continue living with their foster carers after the age of 18, if you both want this.

¹ Since May 2014, fostered young people in England have the right to stay with their foster families when they reach 18, if both parties agree. Similar schemes exist in Scotland and Wales.

The STAGE Framework

The following framework may be helpful to bear in mind when you are thinking about your approach to fostering teenagers. It is called STAGE because each of the letters represents a key element of the relationship between adults and teenagers.

S is for Significance. Adults can feel that they don't have much influence on teenagers, but research shows that 'without a relationship with a caring and stable adult it is so much harder for a teenager to make a successful transition to adulthood'.

T is for Two-way communication. Good communication involves a two-way process, not just telling or asking. Teenagers really need to feel heard and 'good communication between an adult and a young person involves as much listening as talking'.

A is for Authority. Authority at this stage cannot be the same as during childhood. Authority has to be based on respect and good communication. 'A structure has to be in place but it has to be reasonable and to take into account the age and circumstances of the individual young person.'

G is for Generation gap. This is a reminder that adults can all too easily make judgements that are not based on teenage life today. 'Adults must be careful not to make judgements based on the attitudes of an earlier generation.'

E is for Emotion, which is a reminder that the developing teenage brain needs time to mature and regulate itself. Teenagers have 'the capacity to arouse strong emotions in the adults around them...their feelings may also include elements of sadness, distress and even shame when things go wrong. It is essential for foster carers to receive support in learning to recognise and manage their emotions. It is only in this way that adults can help young people to develop a better means of managing their own feelings.'

Taken from *Teenagers in Foster Care* (Coleman, 2016, p12).

Communication

Good communication is key to everything you do as a foster carer, and again and again, advice in this book will focus on the need to really listen to young people in order to create open discussions – to replace more traditional ways of telling young people what to do. Good listening makes a young person feel that they are being valued as an individual, and that their opinions and feelings are being respected and considered.

As adults, we often think that we are listening but we are also running many other things through our head at the same time, and young people often seem to pick the busiest time to try and start a conversation. If you really don't have time to listen properly to a young person when they want to speak to you, then say so. Explain that, for instance, you have to get them to the bus on time, and that you believe what they have to say is important and you don't want to rush it. You will make time for them later and you will give them your full attention.

When you listen to a young person, be aware that there are several different levels of listening.

- There is a very superficial level, where your thoughts are elsewhere and you're simply "going through the motions".
- There is also a level where you are thinking about how you are going to respond to what is being said.
- And then there is deep listening, which is where you listen to each and every word the young person says to you.

Some people are natural deep listeners, but for many of us it doesn't come easily. Truly listening to someone is one of the best ways to make a person feel respected and valued.

When you listen, you don't need to look straight into the young person's eyes – some will find this very off-putting – but sitting alongside the young person or slightly at an angle, and making sure that your body language is open and inviting, is a good way to encourage them to talk. (Avoid folding your arms or sitting perched on the edge of your chair, as this can seem intimidating or as if you do not have time to fully hear them out.) Some young people can also find it easier to talk if you are doing an activity together, like chopping vegetables or walking side by side, as this takes the direct focus off them. Also, it's good to try and pace the young person in the speed at which you speak. If they

are speaking quite fast it can be helpful to respond in a similar way, but then gradually slow the pace down to encourage them to do the same.

A good way to improve your listening skills is to repeat back in your head what is being said to you – it can be surprising what you hear when you do this. You notice the particular words someone else uses, and how often they use them. You need to listen with deep curiosity, wanting to really understand what the young person is saying. Ask open questions, such as ‘How do you feel about that?’, or ‘What would help you?’ Try to stick closely to the young person’s own words and keep judgement out of your response – if they say ‘It was all a bit of a mess’, ask ‘What would help to sort out the mess?’, rather than ‘What are you going to do about this awful situation?’

By listening deeply and asking very open questions, you can encourage a young person to start considering new perspectives. For example, when a young person says that they were never wanted by their mother, you could say: ‘I can understand why you might feel like this, but I remember you telling me about that time before your mum was ill, when you used to have fun with her... and I wonder if there were times when your relationship was better?’ Or when the young person says: ‘I’ve always been rubbish at everything’, you could say something like: ‘I’m curious about who told you that, because that’s not what I see...I see someone very capable and worthwhile and I wonder what stopped other people from seeing that...’ However, make sure that you find ways to make these phrases your own, as young people are very good at spotting when you’re simply using the latest phrase!

Breaking through young people’s armour

Young people in care often develop mental and emotional “armour” to protect and defend themselves, and even in the most caring and supportive environment it is going to take a lot of time and reassurance before they are ready to let go of this protection. You need to ask yourself: what does this young person’s self-protective armour look like, and why have they made it like this? Are they shutting down, not needing anyone’s help, or are they clinging or demanding your attention all the time? How can you start to find cracks in that armour so that the young person can be unguarded enough to be open to new experiences and opportunities for growth and development? Can you use humour? Can you find ways to make them feel that they’re worthy of care and attention?

You probably have your own definition of the “problem/s” you are having with the young person, but what is the young person's definition of the problem? Are you making assumptions about how things are but they're not actually like this at all, from the young person's perspective? Are you trying to achieve things that the young person doesn't understand or doesn't value? Are you undervaluing what really matters to the young person and consequently making them feel that you don't value them? How can you create a shared approach where the young person recognises that you are “on their side”, even if you don't always share the same values and aspirations?

Sensitive caregivers have the capacity to stay in touch with the young person's goals and agenda even if they are very different from those of themselves or other family members. This approach is likely to lead to shared endeavour and an alliance with the young person, rather than a clash of wills and a sense of conflict.

(Schofield and Beek, 2018, p242)

The fostering process

This book is about the issues you may encounter when teenagers are placed with you. Detailed information about the process of preparation to be a foster carer, assessment, and your foster care role and duties can be found in *Thinking About Fostering: The definitive guide to fostering in the UK* (Bond, 2016; published by CoramBAAF). But in brief, in order to foster you need to be accepted by a fostering service that is looking to recruit people with the experiences and attitudes necessary to care for teenagers, and they will then prepare and assess you as a foster carer. Checks and references will also be required. Your application will be put to a fostering panel that will make a recommendation about your suitability as a foster carer to a senior member of the fostering service. If you are approved, you will be given a supervising social worker.

Each young person needing foster care will also have their own social worker – called the child's social worker. Before a young person is placed with you, you will be given an outline of the young person's circumstances and the problems and issues they are likely to face, and you will have a chance to decide if this sounds like a young person you can care for appropriately. If you decide that

you feel able to offer this young person a place in your home, you and the young person will be prepared for the young person to move in and you may have a chance to meet them beforehand. However, a lot of placements occur in an emergency and the social worker may not know very much about the young person. In these cases, you will have to apply your skills to find out/meet this young person's needs until more is known. In some cases, you may be offered additional training to help you look after a young person.

You will be expected to sign a foster care agreement for each young person who is placed with you to say that you have understood the work that the service is asking you to do with this young person. You will also be required to keep evidence-based records of the young person's progress, and any meetings and contact that you and the young person have with staff from other services. You should have regular meetings with your supervising social worker and be offered opportunities for professional development and training.

What this book covers

This handbook covers issues such as the development of the teenage brain, managing behaviour, well-being and mental health, issues of identity and how they impact in the adolescent years, and how to support young people in education and through into young adult life.

It won't give you all the answers – many of them you will have to work out for yourself as you identify and respond to the unique needs of the young person who has come to live in your home – but it does bring together a wealth of information, advice and inspiration from a wide range of sources. It will help you to recognise that nobody gets it right all the time, and why even the most experienced foster carers find some placements much harder than others.

You may find yourself rethinking and adapting your parenting style to overcompensate for all the mental injuries this young person is living with. You will need a great deal of patience, a lot of compassion, a lot of self-regulation to manage your own emotions and responses, and a tough skin to ignore the opinions of other people who don't understand why you may let the young person “get away with” behaviours that they wouldn't allow their teenager to get away with (because you're wise enough to know which battles to fight and which to let go).

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Nobody claims it's going to be easy, but the outcomes can be hugely rewarding when you begin to see young people making changes to their behaviour, achieving little - or even big - things that matter to them, and starting to live fulfilling young adult lives.

Young people can be a delight, they can have new and interesting ideas, challenge your thinking in a good way, be kind and caring sometimes, have good banter, and make great strides in their lives which is very rewarding. They are individual people - not just teenagers.

(Adam, foster carer)



It's all about the brain

During the teenage years, the brain goes through a crucial period of development to prepare us for adulthood. Just before the start of puberty, our brains become highly overproductive, creating many potential new neural pathways. From about the age of 14 until around 25, our brains reinforce the pathways we are likely to need for adulthood and “prune” back the weaker ones. These changes are profound and they also happen to coincide with a time when hormones are causing physical changes in our bodies. It's no wonder that the personalities of teenagers seem to change significantly, and they are full of questions about who they are and what their lives are all about.

In his book, *The Brain: The story of you*, David Eagleman (2015) explains the biological reasons why teenagers tend to be impulsive, more likely to take risks, feel passionately about issues, get easily overwhelmed, and seemingly overreact to situations in ways that adults may find puzzling.

Because these massive changes take place in brain areas required for higher reasoning and the control of urges, adolescence is a time of steep cognitive change. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, important for controlling impulses, is among the most belated regions to mature, not reaching its adult state until the early twenties.

(2015, p15)

Some aspects of teenage behaviour may seem especially puzzling and frustrating to adults. A teenager's need to be constantly in touch with their friends, to reach targets on social media or to have the most expensive trainers or designer products may appear excessive and ridiculous. However, the need to be part of a “tribe” is a compelling urge generated by the teenage brain.

In his video, *The Teenage Brain* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLULtUPyhog), Daniel Siegel says that it is natural for mammals to seek safety by being with others – this is what allows them to survive. Not being able to have this sense of connection can feel like a matter of “life and death”, so when a teenager expresses an urgent need to have a particular kind of shoe or to go to a party with their friends, this is based in an evolutionary drive to belong to the group.

Siegel says that while this doesn't mean we have to give in to everything teenagers ask for, it can help us to have more empathy towards the urgency of their need. They are not simply giving in to peer pressure, but are trying to guarantee their long-term survival.

The additional pressures faced by looked after young people

According to attachment theories – based on the seminal work of John Bowlby and childcare specialists and neuroscientists – a child's resilience (the ability to cope with the changes, stresses and uncertainties of life) is formed by their relationship with their primary carer (usually the mother) during their earliest years. Without a secure attachment during that crucial period, the child lives in a constant state of alarm and arousal. They are unable to tell the difference between real threats and minor stresses, and may be unable to distinguish between excitement and fear.

You may have been fostering a child since their early years and feel that you have done a good job in creating the stability, security and acceptance that this young person needs – but when adolescence occurs, it may feel like all that careful relationship building has vanished. Alternatively, you may be taking in a teenager who has been in a previous stable placement, or who has had multiple placements, or who is in their first placement because family relationships have recently broken down. That young person is bringing all their former history into your home, their confusion and possible distress at being moved and separated from family, friends and former environments, together with the heightened feelings generated by the changes in their brain.

The “pruning” process in the teenage brain can be especially difficult for young people who have experienced trauma in their early lives. The young person may be re-traumatised and previous strategies for managing their feelings may be stripped away.

Childhood defences against too much emotional pain often fail to hold in the teenage years. This is due to all the hormonal, body, brain and psychological changes. This means that early childhood experiences of terror,

abandonment, shame or loss, successfully defended against in childhood, can be triggered in intense emotional outbursts and turmoil.

(Siegel, 2014, p90)

Supporting teenagers with attachment difficulties

You will be told about attachment issues in your training as a foster carer, and why poor attachment to a primary carer at an early stage of life can have a serious impact on an individual's development. A young person with attachment difficulties does not trust you to be able to help them, because their previous experiences have taught them that adults cannot be relied on. You are going to have to devote a lot of time and patience to showing them that they are valued, accepted and that their emotional and physical needs can be met.

If you know the young person is only going to be with you for a short time, you may worry about how much you can achieve and whether developing a strong connection might be harmful to the young person, but what you can do is to instil the beginnings of trust in a young person. Your role is not about "fixing" them, but about providing a supportive and stable environment where they can make new discoveries and neural connections and where, gradually, change can happen in the way in which they experience life and the way in which they respond to it.

Your role as a foster carer is to help the young person manage these changes in their brains, while also modelling ways of behaviour that will help them to feel secure, develop trust and recognise that there are different ways of behaving.

Over time, consistent availability, a pervading sense of unconditional positive regard, and a nurturing response to need counter-balance the primary experience of unavailable adults, and promotes the healthy development of self-esteem and self-worth...

...where the inner world of the child is thought about and their primary needs are answered, the planned environment stands symbolically and practically

for the role and function of the attachment figure: to provide the trusting, reliable and sensitive interactions that engender secure attachment.

(Taylor, 2010)

Conditions that affect a young person's processing abilities

There are a range of conditions that are not mental health issues as such, but which may affect a young person's ability to process information, adapt to new situations and fit in with their peers. These conditions can be more common in looked after children than in the general population. They can add additional problems for young people who have experienced trauma, separation and loss and may also affect the way in which they understand and process their history. However, young people with these conditions may also have unique perspectives on life from which others can learn, and can find a lot of pleasure in activities that suit their personality and strengths. Some of these conditions are explored below.

If you are caring for a young person with any condition that affects their ability to process information, you are likely to receive additional information and training about their needs.

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

In some cases, a child's brain may be affected in the womb by their mother's alcohol use, and this can have a significant effect on their development and functioning. Exposure to alcohol causes damage to the pre-frontal cortex of the foetus's brain. These difficulties may become particularly apparent during the teenage years.

The brain of the alcohol-damaged child is disorganised and the way in which the various parts of the brain connect with and "talk" to each other is slower than in unaffected children. The brain of an affected child needs to work much harder than the brain of an unaffected child in just about everything.

(Mather, 2018)

Symptoms can include hyperactivity, poor judgement, poor planning and organisational skills, failure to consider consequences, short memory span, and impulsivity. Children with this disorder often have very little understanding of risk and can put themselves in situations of serious danger. However, affected children can also be very friendly, loving, loyal, gentle, compassionate and creative.

During the teenage years, carers can play a valuable part in supporting young people with FASD, and can help other people to recognise that the young person is genuinely struggling with everyday issues, rather than being awkward, thoughtless or disobedient. These teenagers can be seen as lazy and unwilling to learn; their impulsiveness, talkativeness and lack of boundaries can make them unpopular with their peers and subject to bullying; and their naivety and inability to assess risks can expose them to being easily led into dangerous situations. Difficulties in school are commonplace.

These young people need a huge amount of routine, consistency and loving support from foster carers who can have positive but realistic expectations for them to realise their potential, and who will open-heartedly celebrate the smallest signs of improvement and development.

Further resources

Mather M (2018) *Dealing with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: A guide for social workers*, London: CoramBAAF

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others.

(National Autistic Society, www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx#)

Autism can have a range of effects on those who have it. Young people on one “end” of the autism spectrum may be very high functioning and have exceptional talents, whereas at the other “end” they may find it almost impossible to communicate. Common features of ASD include:

- difficulties with social interactions and understanding other people’s perspectives;
- a need for routine;

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- obsessive, ritualised behaviours and collecting of facts and information;
- reliance on facts, and taking things at a very literal level, e.g. not understanding metaphors such as 'It's raining cats and dogs'.

Young people with autism may also have learning disabilities and/or mental health issues. Some young people with ASD may be very resistant to physical touch and close relationships, but others may be affectionate and very caring.

Further resources

Carter P (2013) *Parenting a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, London: BAAF

The National Autistic Society website has a range of information, including advice for supporting young people during periods of transition.
www.autism.org.uk/about/transition.aspx

There are a number of helpful books that explore autism, but novels such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* (Mark Haddon, Vintage Children's Classics, 2012) and *Marcelo in the Real World* (Francisco X Stork, Scholastic, 2009) can help readers to gain insight into the minds of young people with autism.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

The symptoms of ADHD are usually noticeable before the age of six. Diagnosis has traditionally been more common in boys, perhaps partly due to the fact that boys are more likely to exhibit the hyperactivity that the disorder can involve, and so their condition can be more noticeable. Symptoms can include:

- short attention span and being easily distracted;
- appearing forgetful and losing things;
- not being able to stick to a task;
- appearing to be unable to listen or carry out instructions;
- being unable to sit still or wait for a turn, and constantly fidgeting, talking and interrupting conversations;
- being unable to concentrate and focus, and making careless mistakes;

- acting without thinking and having little or no sense of danger.

Further resources

Jacobs B and Miles L (2012) *Parenting a Child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*, London: BAAF

Understanding their own brains

Teenagers like to feel in control. They also like explanations that are practical and non-patronising.

Blame My Brain: The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed, by Nicola Morgan, is a highly entertaining, detailed description of how the brain works and how it affects teenage behaviour. It also makes good reading for adults, and can be a great starting point for discussions with fostered teenagers about their behaviour.

Further resources

Forrester D (2012) *Parenting a Child Affected by Parental Substance Misuse*, London: BAAF

Hughes D and Bayon J (2012) *Brain-Based Parenting: The neuroscience of caregiving for healthy attachment*, New York: Norton

Jackson C (2012) *Parenting a Child with Mental Health Issues*, London: BAAF

Morgan N (2013) *Blame My Brain: The amazing teenage brain revealed*, London: Walker

Siegel D (2014) *Brainstorm: The power and purpose of the teenage brain*, London: Scribe

The Teenage Brain, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLULtUPyhog