

# Why do people become foster carers?

**An International Literature Review on the Motivation to Foster**  
by Judy Sebba





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# Executive Summary



The Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education was established in April 2012 with a remit to make a difference to the life chances of all young people in the care system through research with carers, children, young people and the professionals who work with them. Its research agenda is being developed in consultation with key stakeholders and initial discussions suggested that the motivation to foster was a topic of urgent interest to policy makers and practitioners. Understanding how to attract more foster carers is crucial for two reasons. Internationally, the number of children and young people in care is increasing faster than the number of foster carers (e.g. Rodger et al., 2006). Secondly, only half of those who request information about fostering express their intention to consider it further (e.g. Ciarrochi et al., 2011) and Triseliotis et al., (2000) noted that 80% of enquiries do not result in an application.

This review of the international research on motivations to foster was undertaken in order to identify strategies that might increase the numbers attracted to non-kinship fostering and who progress beyond making an initial inquiry. The main review question was:

Why do people initially consider (non-kinship) fostering, and what factors determine whether they progress to application?

The review did not address characteristics of foster carers, assessment, selection and retention. These are all significant areas for further research. Electronic databases and websites were used to search for relevant studies. The majority of studies included were published since 2000, however, a few earlier significant ones are also included. They all focus on non-kinship foster carers' initial motivations to foster, and use the full range of methodologies, from in-depth interviews to large scale interventions. The searching led to identification of 62 studies which after further screening (mainly on their focus) and excluding six from the UK, provided 32 from Canada, the USA and Australia for the review. The findings were then compared and contrasted to those of two recently published UK-focused studies: McDermid et al's (2012) and drawing on an earlier review by Sinclair (2005) review of the UK literature on characteristics, motivation, recruitment and retention and Peake and Townsend's (2012) survey of foster carers in England.

Some shortcomings were noted in the capacity of the studies to address the question. Many studies were small-scale and relied upon a single source of data, limiting the capacity to generalize from their findings. Surveys only exceptionally (e.g. Ciarrochi et al., 2011; Randle et al., 2012 both Australian) used prospective rather than retrospective sampling, meaning that most findings depended on foster carers' memories of their initial motivations. There was only one study (Brown et al., 2006) in which carers themselves played a significant role in the research, through for example helping to formulate the research questions or being trained to undertake interviews of other carers.

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## Key Findings

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The international studies bring a broader perspective to what is known about initial motivations to foster. Three main findings emerged from the research:

- What most often leads people to consider non-kinship fostering is meeting or knowing other foster carers as a child or adult or, less often, contact with a fostered child or young person (e.g. Rodger et al., 2006);
- Myths held by the general public concerning fostering are common and can be addressed through better information such as factsheets (e.g. Casey Programs, 2005), though contact with foster parents is the most effective means of education (McHugh et al., 2004);
- Failure to provide appropriate support for carers (Blythe et al., 2012) and interactions with carers that imply lack of respect, information and involvement are a major source of dissatisfaction that may send negative messages to those considering fostering.

### Other findings that emerged included:

- The main drivers for finding out more about fostering are intrinsic and essentially altruistic ones often expressed as 'loving children', and wanting to make a difference to the lives of children (e.g. Buehler et al., 2003);
- Other motivations included extending the family/providing a sibling for a lone child, putting something back into the community, personal experience of being fostered or growing up with fostered children and wanting home-based employment (e.g. Andersson, 2001);
- Income generation is not a principal motivation to foster, though studies of motivation only rarely distinguish between carers from different income groups (e.g. Randle et al., 2012). Covering costs and replacing income from employment that has ceased (or been exchanged for fostering) are important considerations in decisions to proceed (e.g. Rodger et al., 2006);

- Responses to initial inquiries are often insufficiently prompt, leading to a major fall-off between these requests and progress to registration which carers in some studies report as demotivating (e.g. Keogh and Svensson, 1999).

Meeting or knowing others who foster emerges clearly as an initial key motivator from the international and UK literature (McDermid et al., 2012; Peake and Townsend, 2012). Lack of information and understanding about fostering in the general population is also a key issue. Given the differences in jurisdictions and cultural contexts influencing fostering services in different countries, some research findings will not be transferable. However, there is evidence that many findings can be generalized and international research should be used to inform policy and practice.

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## Recommendations for policy and practice

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- Foster carers are engaged by some providers to act as 'ambassadors' in recruitment. Given the important role they play in attracting people to fostering, this role should be strengthened in publicising opportunities to foster. Foster carers should be actively engaged and remunerated for their recruitment endeavors;
- The international evidence notes the potential barrier to fostering created by the negative or mythical perceptions of fostering in the wider community (e.g. Osborn et al., 2007). The examples given by the Casey Programs (2005) demonstrate the increase in motivation that can be achieved by providing 'Myth-busting Facts' and could be adopted in the UK by foster care providers;
- Further attention should be given to how initial enquiries can be followed up more promptly and effectively, thereby increasing potential recruitment;
- Foster care providers should follow up those who enquire but do not progress further in the process in order to identify the factors that influence the decision not to continue. This could be an appropriate role in which to engage established carers.

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## Recommendations for research

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- Most studies relied on single sources of data, such as interviews, postal/online surveys or focus groups, weakening the capacity to validate findings through 'triangulation'. More studies using mixed methods would allow both 'what' and 'how' questions to be addressed;
- In the quest for 'what works' the use of larger cross sector (local authority and independent) samples of foster carers would strengthen both the validity and the capacity to generalize. Experimental studies involving interventions designed to increase numbers of people making initial enquiries with robust evaluations would also improve the evidence base;
- All but four of the studies reviewed used samples of existing foster carers. In order to better understand why initial enquiries do not progress to full registration, those who choose not to proceed (as in Delfabbro et al., 2008; Keogh and Svensson, 1999) or have never considered fostering (as in Randle et al., 2012) need to be sampled and prospective studies (as in Ciarrochi et al., 2011; Randle et al., 2012) need to be undertaken. These studies should include exploration of whether negative messages from established carers are contributing to the decision;
- Existing studies have not attempted to engage foster carers in informing the research questions or conducting interviews (with appropriate training) of other carers or prospective carers. One study (Brown et al., 2006) in Canada involved the carer research participants in the data analysis by asking them to group the statements generated in the interviews about their motivations to foster. Future research should explore whether peer-to-peer research leads to different and more valid perspectives.

<sup>1</sup>Triangulation increases the validity of data through cross verification from more than two sources



## Background

Understanding how to attract more foster carers is crucial. In the UK there are increasing numbers of children in care (McDermid et al., 2012 suggest a 9% increase 2007-11 and there was a 2% increase in 2011-12) and, while the number of carers is increasing, it is not doing so as fast. The Fostering Network<sup>2</sup> estimates a shortage of 10,000 foster homes in the UK. Similarly, in the US and Canada, Rodger et al., (2006) note that the numbers of children coming into foster care has increased faster than that of carers. In Australia, Osborn et al., (2007) report that the number of children coming into care is increasing, but the number of (non-kinship) carers is decreasing, demand outstripping supply (Ciarrochi et al., 2011), thereby placing much greater pressure on the system. Only half of those who request information about fostering express their intention to consider it further (e.g. Ciarrochi et al., 2011) and Triseliotis et al., (2000) noted that 80% of enquiries do not result in an application.

Initial discussions with stakeholders suggested that the motivation to foster was a priority for policy makers and practitioners. Initial searches for relevant existing research suggested that there are many published studies whose findings are not well-known or used. The Rees Centre is committed to making available findings accessible to practitioners and policy makers.

## Aims and scope

This review of the international research addresses the initial motivations in non-kinship fostering and was undertaken in order to identify strategies that might increase the numbers attracted to fostering and who progress beyond making an initial inquiry. The main review question was:

- Why do people initially consider (non-kinship) fostering, and what factors determine whether they progress to application?

The review did not address characteristics of foster carers, assessment, selection and retention issues that are all significant areas of research. The findings were compared and contrasted to those of two recently published UK-focused studies: McDermid et al's (2012) review of the UK literature on characteristics, motivation, recruitment and retention of foster carers and Peake and Townsend's (2012) survey for The Fostering Network of over 1,400 foster carers in England that informed their accessible toolkit on what motivates people to foster. However, neither of these studies looked at the significant body of literature outside the UK.

There are limitations in transferring research findings across different international contexts, given the different legislative frameworks and cultural contexts influencing fostering. Osborn et al (2007) argue, for example, that Australia's strong focus on family reunification makes research on some aspects of fostering undertaken in other countries less transferable. However, provided that the challenges relating to transferability of findings are acknowledged, studies from other international contexts provide an important stimulus to think 'outside the box' when developing fostering services. This review aims to provide the basis for informing further developments and reconsiderations of the ways in which fostering services seek to attract new foster carers.

## Theories of motivation

Few researchers in the field of motivation would deny the importance of both what the person brings to a situation such as fostering and the way in which contextual factors shape how people approach fostering. Nonetheless, studies of motivation typically attend primarily to either personal qualities or attributes, or to how external conditions shape behaviour. Intrinsic motivation is usually seen as the most powerful and enduring form of motivation. It resides within the individual, gives direction to their intentions and actions and includes their values, beliefs and emotions; whereas extrinsic motivation relates to external factors such as rewards, which shape behaviour.

Research on job satisfaction suggests that it is linked more strongly to intrinsic than to extrinsic motivation, leading one to expect that intrinsic motivation to foster is a stronger factor in decisions to apply than simply responding to external inducements. Other theoretical approaches that have been applied in the fostering field include expectancy theory and equity theory, which Rodger et al., (2006) suggest offer helpful explanations of the role of motivational factors in seeking to become a foster carer. Expectancy theory states that, in order for a person to be motivated, effort, performance and outcomes must be linked. Traditional definitions of outcome (e.g. clear progress of children) may not be immediately apparent to those considering fostering and broader perceptions of longer-term outcomes might be more influential. Equity theory suggests that the comparison people make between their rewards and those of others in a similar situation influences their sense of fairness that in turn affects motivation. In the context of fostering, levels of payment offered, while not the principal motivator, might be relevant in decisions to progress with applications.

However, Latham and Pinder (2005) review motivational theory and argue for a more culturally-oriented approach that acknowledges the role of national culture, the characteristics of the job itself, and the fit between the person and the practices in which they work as important motivational factors.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-10869171>

## The fostering process

The figure below describes simplistically the process of becoming a foster carer, in order to clarify the stage in the process addressed in this review. The focus here is on how people first become aware of the possibility of fostering, and what then influences whether they take this forward to become foster carers. Two Australian studies (Delfabbro et al., 2008; Keogh and Svensson 1999) for example, looked specifically at why people who initially enquire about fostering do not become carers. No distinction is made in this review between different types of non-kinship foster care.



## Methodology

This review synthesizes the findings from the international literature on the initial motivation to foster, in particular looking at research that has taken place in North America, Australasia and Scandinavia. Electronic databases including ASSIA, SCOPUS and SSCI were searched on 'motivation and fostering', or 'motivation and foster care' from 2000 (though a few 'seminal' earlier studies were accessed) and references were screened for relevance. All studies that focused on non-kinship foster carers' initial motivations to foster and used the full range of methodologies, from in-depth interviews to large-scale interventions, were included.

From this electronic searching process, checking the websites of relevant organisations in Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada, and from the references in studies identified, 62 journal articles, booklets and reports were selected. These were further screened on focus, and six reports of studies in the UK that had already been reviewed in McDermid et al., (2012) were also excluded. The findings from the other 32 form the basis for this review. These ranged from studies directly and centrally seeking to identify the reasons why foster carers begin fostering to those with a broader remit or those that focused on other issues (e.g. ethnic matching), but addressed motivation to foster peripherally.

The findings are then compared and contrasted to the conclusions drawn in a recent review of UK studies (McDermid et al., 2012) and a large-scale survey of carers in England (Peake and Townsend, 2012). The relative lack of relevant recent research in the UK addressing motivation to foster meant that many of the studies included in a recent UK review (McDermid et al., 2012) were comparatively dated.

## Status of the studies

Most of the UK studies specifically addressing why people foster were not undertaken in the recent context of service provision. Of the six key 'studies' on motivation to foster reviewed by McDermid et al., none were published fewer than five years ago and four were published at least eight years ago highlighting the need for further research. One was a recent Ofsted (2011) survey reporting on monitoring data, rather than research and, as such, represented a different type of evidence. The Peake and Townsend (2012) survey provides a large-scale recent overview of the views of foster carers.

The field has been dominated by qualitative studies that, while mostly robust, do not provide predictive data that can be generalized more widely, for example on what initially attracts people to fostering. Few of the studies reviewed used experimental designs and most relied mainly on online or mailed questionnaires or interviews. The studies were undertaken in the following countries:

<b>Australia</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Canada</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>USA</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Sweden</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Norway/Comparative</b>	<b>1</b>

# Key findings

## How the general population views fostering

### The awareness of fostering is considered to be an important influence on potential foster carers.

In an Australian study (South Australian Department of Family and Community Studies, SADFCs 1997, cited in Osborn et al., 2007, no sample size given) 2.4% of who were current or former carers, just over a quarter had considered it. Over a third of the entire sample said they would not know whom to contact if they wanted more information, and the report concluded that the majority of the population is not reached by the recruitment campaigns. Delfabbro et al., (2008) also in Australia noted that a major recruitment campaign attracted lots of enquiries but fewer than 2% registered as carers due to lack of prior knowledge and understanding in the community about the nature of foster care. Less than a quarter of the 347 people surveyed knew anything about foster care, which led the researchers to conclude that better information should be provided prior to large-scale recruitment campaigns.

In a representative sample in Australia of nearly 800 who had not considered fostering before, (Randle et al., 2012) 52% stated that they did not know anything about fostering and as in the previous studies, nearly 30% did not know where to find the information. In contrast, Leber and LeCroy (2012) found that in a sample of over 300 drawn from across the USA the majority had a good understanding of fostering as demonstrated through correctly identifying knowledge statements. However, nearly two thirds were under the misapprehension that most children in foster care are kinship fostered.

### The image of fostering also influences potential foster carers.

The Casey Programs (2005 p.28) noted through surveys of the general public that many myths are held about foster care:

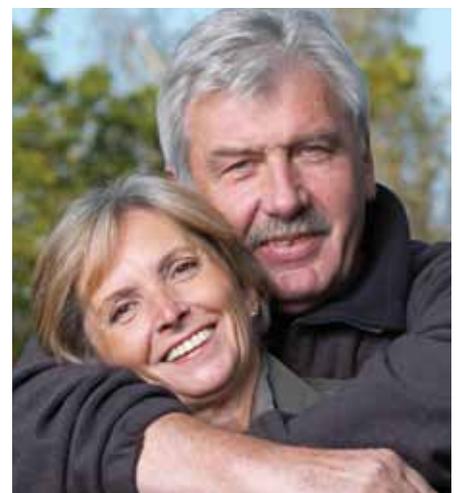
**Myths that agencies need to correct include the beliefs that foster parents must: have a large home; make a certain amount of money; have children of their own; and own their own home. Community members often have no idea about the kinds of children needing care.**

The researcher-service provider teams in the Casey Programs (2005) investigated the myths held in the community and then produced fact sheets to counteract the myths. For example, in Denver County, Colorado the Collaborative surveyed the public perceptions of foster caring and this informed their fact sheet that addressed the question 'why should we care?'

Similarly, the foster carers in Daniel's (2011, p.914) Canadian study felt that people outside fostering believed it was a lucrative form of employment, that all children in foster care and their parents were 'bad' and that foster carers lose their friends because 'no one would want to be around the children in their care'.

The problem of 'stigma' for foster carers was also noted in an Australian study (Blythe et al., 2012), in which carers avoided using the label of 'foster carer' because of what they perceived as its negative associations and consequent experience of social isolation and loss of status. Another Australian study (Richardson et al., 2005), focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who become carers, noted that poor public perceptions discourage prospective foster parents.

In a further study, Blythe et al., (2012) went on to report that female foster carers, in particular those engaged in longer term placements, were more likely to perceive their role as parenting rather than as a paid carer. These researchers acknowledge the earlier study by Smyth and McHugh (2006) in which foster-carers' understanding of their role was found to differ according to the type of foster care they provide.



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## How potential foster carers find out about fostering

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In a large scale survey in Ontario, (Rodger et al., 2006), the most endorsed statements about the ways in which foster carers had found out about fostering were 'knowing other foster families' (35%), 'knowing other foster children' (13%), 'having parents who provided foster care' (11%) and 'seeing a newspaper advertisement' (11%). The influence of existing foster carers on those considering fostering is also important. McHugh et al., (2004) in Australia noted that current experienced carers were successful recruiters by 'word-of-mouth'. This highlights the crucial role that foster carers and fostered children play in acting as ambassadors for foster care. This finding is confirmed in many other studies from Australia (e.g. Victorian Government Department of Human Services, 2003), Canada (e.g. Daniel, 2001), USA (e.g. Baum et al., 2001) and the UK (e.g. Triseliotis et al., 2000).

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## Why do people initially consider fostering and what factors determine whether they progress to application?

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### Intrinsic motivations

Studies about motivation to foster often distinguish between intrinsic (values, beliefs and emotions within the potential carer) and extrinsic factors (those related to external factors such as wanting a 'sibling' for a birth child, having adequate accommodation and income generation). A further possible distinction that can be made is between reasons that relate to the foster carer, those related to the wider family and those perceived to be related to the wider society.

#### About the foster carer

Motivations that relate directly to the foster carer include a desire to help children that has been noted in Sweden (e.g. Andersson, 2001), Canada (e.g. Brown et al., 2006; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006), Australia (Broady et al., 2009; Delfabbro et al., 2002) and the USA (e.g. Baum et al., 2001; Buehler

et al., 2003; Rhodes et al., 2006). Studies have highlighted other motivations, including using own parenting skills in Canada (Brown et al., 2006) providing love and putting something back into the community across a number of countries (Colton et al., 2006), in the USA (Buehler et al., 2003; Denby et al., 1999), Australia (Delfabbro et al., 2002) and Canada (Daniel, 2011; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006). Finally, Rodger et al., (2006) in Canada and research in USA (e.g. Baum et al., 2001; Buehler et al., 2003) reported that religious motivations emerged from their large-scale surveys as a key factor.

Rodger et al.'s (2006) Canadian study of 652 foster carers who responded to the Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey (adapted from Denby et al., 1999) reported that 'providing loving parents to children' (92%) and 'saving children from further harm' (89%), emerged as the two most frequently endorsed statements (respondents could select more than one statement). This finding was also noted by Cole (2005) in the USA. These researchers suggested that this is in keeping with job motivation theory in emphasizing the intrinsic aspects though, as noted earlier, motivation theorists suggest that the characteristics of the job and fit between the person and the practices are critical. In a smaller scale Canadian study, Daniel (2011) reported that experienced foster carers suggested that their initial motivations were love for children and personal satisfaction, both of which are identified in many other studies (e.g. Delfabbro et al., 2002 in Australia).

#### About the family

Motivations that relate to the family that emerge include providing a brother/sister for their own child (Baum et al., 2001; Cole, 2005; Rodger et al., 2006), and the desire of (usually) the mother to stay at home and look after birth children rather than going out to work (Andersson, 2001; Swartz, 2004). Wanting to adopt was also noted as an initial motivation to foster in some studies (Andersson, 2001; Rodger et al., 2006) either because it was a way of testing the water or because it was available to those who were unable to adopt, although one Australian study (Delfabbro et al., 2002) noted that this was rarely a key factor.

## Extrinsic motivations

Studies undertaken in the USA (Baum et al., 2001; Denby et al., 1999) and Canada (MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006) identified making a difference to the lives of children as a key factor. Filling an 'empty nest' was also noted in studies in Sweden (Andersson, 2001) and Canada (MacGregor et al., 2006; Rodger et al., 2006). Randle et al.'s (2012) prospective study found that being 'too busy with their own children' was a reason given by 30% of their large sample for not considering fostering at that time. The perceived shortage of foster homes in the community and increase in children needing fostering were given as initial motivations in studies in Canada and the USA (Brown et al., 2006; Cole, 2005; Daniel, 2011; Tyebjee, 2003). Baum et al., (2001) in the USA found that an awareness of the need for foster care was the most influential factor in the decision of whether or not to foster. Randle et al.'s (2012) prospective study in Australia noted that 62% had never considered fostering because no one had asked them to do it, suggesting that communication about the need for foster care may be lacking.

Many studies (e.g. Rodger et al., 2006) have concluded that supplementary income through payment is not usually the prime initial reason for fostering, although its role in retention of foster carers, which is outside the scope of this review, is well established (e.g. Hudson and Levasseur, 2002). While not necessarily a principal motivator, studies of motivation rarely distinguish between carers from different income groups. Covering the costs incurred in fostering and replacing income from employment that has ceased (or been exchanged for fostering) are important considerations in decisions to proceed (e.g. Rodger et al., 2006). One ethnographic study of foster families in the USA (Swartz, 2004) concluded that economic motivations were equally balanced with altruistic ones. Other studies (e.g. Randle et al., 2012) have shown that the role of payments varies across different income groups which are not usually differentiated in the studies.

## Approaches to assessing motivation of foster carers

The Motivations for Foster Parenting Inventory (Yates et al., 1997) was adapted by Cole (2005) in the USA to relate motivations to foster to security of subsequent attachment. The three main motivations that emerged were desire to increase family size, rescuing children who were in danger of harm and social concerns related to the need for more foster homes. The desire to increase family size was linked most strongly with subsequent stronger attachments between foster carer and child.

The Foster Parent Satisfaction Survey (FPSS, Denby et al., 1999), developed and tested on a large sample in the USA, has 65 items organized into five sections. Although mainly focused on satisfaction and retention, rather than initial motivation, one section focuses on 'motivation to become a foster parent'. Rodger et al., (2006) used an adapted version of the FPSS in Canada and reported on motivation, recruitment, satisfaction and retention. They demonstrated the instrument's capacity to distinguish between those who considered quitting fostering and those who did not. They concluded that the initial reasons to foster 'reflected foster parents' altruistic and internal motivations to foster'. These instruments for assessing motivation have not, as yet, been tested out in the UK. Research on the development and evaluation of questionnaires and schedules designed to assist in the selection process (e.g. Delgado and Pinto, 2011) are outside the scope of this review.

## The barriers to progressing from initial enquiry to fostering

A key issue in considering the initial motivations to foster concerns the large drop-off reported between the stage of making initial enquiries and actually becoming a foster carer. In 1990, Bebbington and Miles noted that, across local authorities in England, the drop out rate between initial enquiry and registration ranged from 70-95%. Between 2004 and 2006 the State Government of South Australia ran a major recruitment campaign which led to a considerable increase in the number of initial enquiries but fewer than 2% of these were eventually registered as carers (Delfabbro et al., 2008). In Ciarrochi et al.'s (2011), Australian survey using a prospective sample of over 1000 people who had never fostered, 80% requested further information about fostering but only 45% stated that they would consider fostering in the future.

The most common reasons given in the SADFCS (1997) study in Australia for why those who enquired had not pursued fostering were changes in circumstances, work commitments, a perception that their lifestyle was not suited to fostering, or they had not got round to it. Issues of disruption to their own families and costs incurred were also raised. Delfabbro et al.'s (2008) study of 347 people who made initial contact with the fostering service, but did not progress their interest, suggests that fear of failure was the greatest concern, expressed by more than half the sample, followed by concerns about the nature of foster care itself (30% of respondents) including for example, fear of false allegations of abuse.

An earlier study in Australia, (Keogh and Svensson 1999) found that only half those who expressed interest received a personal follow-up to their enquiry. Of those enquiring, 96% had not become carers ten months later, though Peake and Townsend (2012) in England noted that it took on average much longer than this between first considering fostering and approval, although these researchers did not specify which type of providers were involved.

While half of those in the Australian study did not continue due to personal circumstances, one quarter did not proceed because the agency did not follow up their initial enquiry. Two thirds were not satisfied with the outcome.

The Casey Programs (2005 p.40) found that potential foster carers did not always receive the response they anticipated when they made enquiries:

**...shared experiences of being placed on hold for long periods of time, not receiving information in a timely manner, or having to wait months for the orientation session.**

The Casey Programs (2005) team from Erie County, New York, attempted an intervention aimed at engaging people who called to enquire about becoming a foster carer, but who then did not attend the information meeting offered. Within three days of the group meeting, the team contacted the potential carer and offered a one-on-one information meeting. These meetings increased the recruitment of carers who would otherwise not have proceeded to apply to be a foster carer.

Other barriers identified in studies include the stringent requirements, bureaucracy, risk of allegations (Daniel, 2011), feelings of marginalization and disempowerment within the governing systems (Blythe et al., 2012).



## Limitations of the current evidence base

Established foster carers constituted the samples in most studies, relying upon the accuracy of their 'memories' about how they felt when initially enquiring about fostering. It seems likely that with hindsight and the realities of experience, initial motivations may not accurately be recalled as they were at the time. Several studies highlighted the need in future research for prospective sampling, in particular of those who do not continue the process following initial enquiries about fostering.

Most studies involved interviews and engaged researchers, professionals or others not specifically identified, in undertaking these interviews. It is possible that these interviewers were in some instances perceived by carers to be influencing the assessment, selection or reviewing processes, leading to 'guarded' responses. No study employed carers (appropriately trained) as interviewers, although one study (Brown et al., 2006) in Canada involved the carer research participants in the data analysis through the use of 'concept mapping' which involved them in grouping the statements generated in the interviews about their motivations to foster. Brown et al. argue that the participants, not the researchers are the experts on this topic, and they define the issues and determine the extent to which the statements that emerge are similar to each other. Engaging carers in the interview process in future studies might be a strategy that would produce different, and arguably more valid, perspectives.

The use of small samples (e.g. of fewer than 25 carers) in as many as a third of all the studies reviewed, selected by convenience and interviewed as a single source of data weakens the evidence base. Using multiple sources of data allows for checking findings from one source against another and addressing conflicting messages that emerge. Using mixed methods enables different types of questions to be addressed for example, about effectiveness of interventions or strategies for implementation. With one exception (Randle et al., 2012), studies did not identify the socio-economic circumstances of different groups of carers in looking, for example, at the role of income as a motivating factor. Randle et al.'s findings suggest that this might clarify whether national or average figures are masking variations between groups of carers.

# Comparison with the UK research

## Factors that are similar

**Meeting or knowing others who foster emerges clearly as an initial key motivating factor** in the evidence from the international and UK literature (e.g. McDermid et al., 2012).

The experience of being fostered or of growing up in a family with foster children was also an important motivation (e.g. Peake and Townsend, 2012). Rodger et al.'s (2006) finding that fewer than 7% of foster carers in a large-scale Canadian survey endorsed the statement 'wanting to increase household income' as an initial reason for fostering, mirrors the UK review findings that payment is not usually the prime initial reason (e.g. Kirton, 2001; McDermid et al., 2012; Triseliotis et al., 2000), although 40% of foster carers in The Fostering Network survey stated that income was a consideration, with loss of earnings cited in many studies. As Peake and Townsend (2012) note half of the carers in their survey were previously in full-time and a quarter in part-time employment prior to fostering and ongoing costs must be met or retention (which is outside the scope of this review) is likely to be reduced (Hudson and Levasseur, 2002).

**The five top reasons for starting fostering given in the Peake and Townsend (2012, p.10) survey were:**

- Opportunity for children to be part of the family (86%);
- Good thing for them or their family to do (77%);
- Wanted to work with children (69%);
- Own past experiences including having been fostered or had parents who fostered (36%);
- Partner wanted to do it (58% of men, 30% of women).

**Other reasons given in the survey mirror those that emerge from the international literature, such as:**

- Personal experience of being in care or growing up in a fostering family;
- Wanting to build on personal or professional experience of looking after children.

McDermid et al's (2012) review noted intrinsic factors such as sense of satisfaction, seeing children progress, love of children and doing something worthwhile. Extrinsic factors reported by McDermid et al included making a difference to a child's life, having something to offer, carer's own childhood experiences (e.g. of being fostered), awareness of the need for carers and extending or 'replacing' their own family.

## Factors that are different

**The international research reviewed gave greater prominence to the public image of fostering,** ways of addressing this through myth-busting, for example, and the crucial role played by established foster carers as initial informants and subsequent supporters. These factors suggest possible ways forward for the future development of policy and practice. In particular, the implications of these findings indicate strategies that might increase the small proportion of those initially enquiring about fostering who progress to application. Alternatively, since little is known about those who do not progress from initial enquiry, it is possible that this reflects 'healthy' self-selection and that instead overall number of enquiries should be increased in order to increase the supply of those becoming carers.

Given the differences in jurisdictions and cultural contexts influencing fostering services in different countries, some research findings may not be transferable. However, there is evidence that many findings can be generalized across different international contexts and international research should be used to inform policy and practice.

**This review of the international research suggests that there is much scope for further development in how studies are conducted.**

Prospective samples and the use of multi-method designs are scarce and these would increase the validity of the findings. Engaging foster carers in the research process through refining the research questions, undertaking interviews (with appropriate training) and commenting on the interpretation of emerging findings would also strengthen validity.





# Conclusions

## **In order to foster, people must know something about it.**

In a seminal large-scale study looking at the characteristics and circumstances of foster carers across local authorities in England in order to anticipate supply, Bebbington & Miles (1990, p.299) noted:

**The conclusion to be drawn from the numerous studies of fostering applicants is that the decision to become a foster parent is not made in response to a single stimulus...**

Over 20 years later, the current UK and international literature suggests that this statement is still valid. The first critical finding to emerge from the recent international literature (e.g. Osborn et al, 2007; Randle et al., 2012) is that up to two thirds of the general population in Australia have never considered fostering because they have not been asked and a **half of these large samples also indicated that they do not know anything about fostering.**

## **Better communication of information is needed.**

There are no recent prospective studies in the UK against which to compare these figures but even if the proportions were lower, there is plenty of scope for improving communicating about fostering. Specific groups of the population may also merit targeting for information. Randle et al. (2012) note that years may pass before an initial consideration is acted upon and that targeting those who currently see caring for their own children as a barrier to fostering with positive images and information about fostering might increase future recruitment.

The international literature suggests that **contact with existing foster carers** is a key initial motivating factor for enquiring about fostering. Other compelling factors in both the UK and international literature are mainly intrinsic, for example responding to values about the perceived plight of children in society, and the need for personal fulfillment. However, extrinsic factors, such as income and expanding the family, are acknowledged as important contributory factors in final decisions to proceed to application to foster.

The evidence, mainly from studies of retention which is outside the scope of this review, is that foster parents identify a number of shortcomings in the way they are perceived by some foster care services. While repeatedly told that they are part of a team supporting the child or young person, foster carers report that they are not kept informed about matters related to the child, and that their perspectives are not given due weight in decisions (e.g. Brown and Campbell, 2007; Daniel, 2011). They often feel unappreciated and unrecognized (e.g. Brown and Calder, 1999; Hudson and Levasseur, 2002). These findings need to be linked to those about the key role of foster carers in initial motivations to foster. If the perceived lack of appreciation and recognition is addressed, perhaps established foster carers will provide a different and more consistently positive account to those initially enquiring about fostering, leading to higher numbers pursuing the process to application, and thus improving recruitment.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

- The international evidence notes the scope for 'educating' the public about fostering through better information and positive images. Barriers to fostering are created by lack of any knowledge or information about fostering as well as the negative or mythical perceptions of fostering in the wider community (e.g. Osborn et al, 2007). The examples given in the Casey Programs (2005) demonstrate the increase in motivation that can be achieved by providing 'Myth-busting Facts' and this could be adapted for the UK by foster care providers;
- Foster carers are engaged by some providers to act as 'ambassadors' in recruiting new foster carers. Given the important role they play in attracting people to fostering, this role should be strengthened in publicising opportunities to foster. Foster carers should be actively engaged and remunerated for their recruitment endeavors;
- Further attention should be given to how initial enquiries can be followed up more promptly and effectively. Employing carers in following up initial enquiries would capitalise on the evidence of their influence;
- Foster care providers and researchers should follow up those who enquire but do not progress further in the process in order to identify the factors that influence the decision not to continue.



## Recommendations for future research

- Most studies relied on single sources of data such as interviews, postal/on-line surveys or focus groups, weakening the capacity to validate findings through triangulation<sup>3</sup>. More studies using mixed methods would allow both 'what' and 'how' questions to be addressed;
- In the quest for 'what works', the use of larger cross sector (local authority, independent, voluntary) samples of foster carers would strengthen both validity and the capacity to generalize. Distinguishing more clearly between different groups of carers would reveal whether national or average figures are masking significant differences between groups;
- The use of randomly allocated control groups or, where these are not realistic, pre- and post- intervention designs and comparison groups, would enable specific recruitment strategies to be tested out and would contribute to increasing the robustness of the evidence base;
- All but four (all Australian) of the studies reviewed used samples of existing foster carers. In order to better understand why initial enquiries do not progress to full registration, those who choose not to proceed need to be sampled, (as in Delfabbro et al. 2008; Keogh & Svensson, 1999) and studies of prospective foster carers (as in Ciarrochi et al., 2011; Randle et al., 2012) need to be undertaken. These studies should include exploration of whether negative messages from established carers contribute to decisions not to proceed;
- The important role of 'word-of-mouth' in why people become foster carers is worthy of further investigation. With the exception of Brown et al. (2007) in Canada, existing studies have not attempted to engage foster carers in the research process. There is a potential role for them in informing the research questions and undertaking training in order to conduct interviews with other carers or prospective carers. Future research should explore whether, provided they have appropriate research skills, this peer-to-peer research could lead to different and more valid perspectives.

**The Rees Centre is committed to providing robust, useful and timely research and will be consulting a wide range of stakeholders on the findings from this review and considering how to take these recommendations forward. We look forward to your comments.**

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<sup>3</sup>Triangulation increases the validity of data through cross verification from more than two sources.

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