

Child psychology beyond the school gates: Empowering foster and adoptive parents of young people in public care, who have been rejected, neglected and abused

R.J. (Seán) Cameron

***Aim:** In this article, an applied psychology approach designed to support carers of looked-after children is described and its impact on these young people is evaluated.*

***Rationale:** Children and young people in public care are arguably the most vulnerable group in our society and despite considerable support and financial expenditure, their personal, social and wellbeing outcomes have remained stubbornly poor. In particular, school-based interventions have led to only slight improvements in attainment levels and these children still lag far behind their peers.*

The 'Emotional Warmth' model of professional child care was developed to empower residential carers and foster/ adoptive parents to understand and meet the often-complex needs of these children. In this article, the main components of the 'Emotional Warmth' model are described, the key role of the psychologist consultant is outlined and some input outcomes are considered.

***Findings:** The results of a ten-month 'Emotional Warmth' project involving the foster and adoptive parents of fourteen children are presented. The analysis shows that significant positive change occurred in both the behavioural and affective measures (p less than 0.05). These results are discussed, as are the serendipitous benefits for both the educational psychologist consultants and their local authority service manager.*

***Limitations:** Some methodological constraints are considered.*

***Conclusions:** It is argued that this model of professional child care can enable foster and adoptive parents to achieve positive outcomes for the young people in their care.*

***Keywords:** Children in public care; foster and adoptive parents; psychology-based interventions; group consultation; evaluating impact; improving outcomes for vulnerable children.*

Introduction

Foster and residential care is a complex activity. (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence/Social Care Institute for Excellence, NICE, 2010, page 9).

In 2016, 70,440 children and young people in England were in the care of local authorities¹ Educational psychologists will be well

aware of the struggle which many of these looked-after children have in school and will also have noted their attainment levels which are well below their peers, even when compared with other disadvantaged groups (Jackson & McParlin, 2006). The attainment gap for looked-after children achieving five or more GCSEs or equivalents at A*-C (including English and Mathematics) was 40

¹ The figures for the remainder of Britain and for Ireland are as follows: Scotland, 15,500+; Wales, 5,500+; Republic of Ireland, 5,000+ and Northern Ireland 2,800+. Reference source: CoramBAAF (2016) Statistics UK <http://www.corambaaf.org.uk/res/statuk>.