

# WHY WE NEED TO FOCUS ON STRENGTHS

How beliefs can influence our attitudes and behaviour towards children in care.

by COLIN MAGINN

**T**here is a high bar to reach for a child to end up in foster care. Local authorities have limited resources and will only take a child into care to ensure that the child is safe. By then, the child will likely have endured prolonged neglect or abuse, often leading to developmental trauma. In many cases, the child's adaptive strategies to cope, lead to labelling them as a problem child. Yet, we can see from the pie chart below in Figure 1, that 'socially unacceptable behaviour' (in red) explains only 1% of the children received into care. In other words, 'problem adults' are responsible for over 90% of care placements.

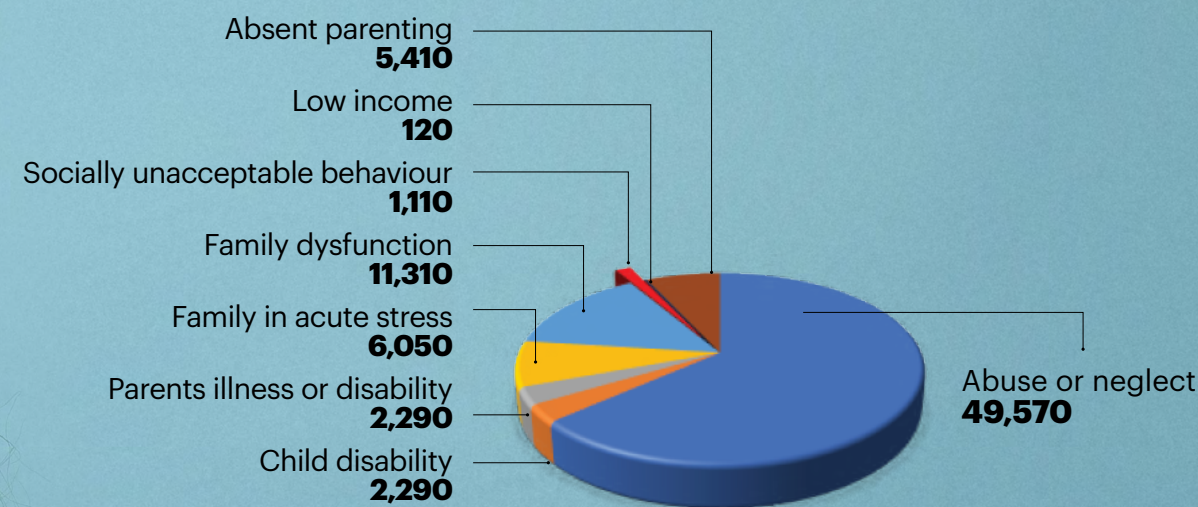
While enlightened, sensitive, kind and emotionally warm foster parents will understand that multiple traumas cause harm to any child, most government and local authority policymakers, the media, and the general public do not appear to share that insight. Indeed, the usual view is that children are resilient and can quickly bounce back. For many children, the opposite is true, as explained by Dr Bruce Perry, 'It is an ultimate irony that at the time when the human is most vulnerable to the effects of trauma – during infancy and childhood – adults generally presume the most resilience'. (Perry, 1995, p. 272).

## A triple whammy

Most children who end up in care have to deal with many emotional hurdles:

- 1) They have endured abuse and neglect instead of love and protection.
- 2) They have emotional turmoil coping with and trusting new adults and new situations.
- 3) The child's strategies to cope with the original abuse and neglect are often viewed by the adults as 'problem behaviours'.

FIGURE 1- Category of need for looked after children from March 2018 to 31 March 2019 (Total 78,150)



National Statistics: Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019 (accessed 04/12/20)

The responsiveness and capacity for a child to adapt to change in, or form new relationships, was the starting point for Patricia Crittenden's (2015) Dynamic Maturation Model of attachment (DMM). She described how resourceful children use, develop and perfect strategies to survive in hostile situations, such as rejecting, neglectful or abusive parents.

These tried and tested survival strategies have taken time and effort for the child to perfect, so an emotionally traumatised child will likely want to hold on to their tactics even when they are obstructive in their new home. Your job as a kind and informed foster parent is to keep the child safe, to spot stress, and to help the child to be calm and regulated. To build attachments which are fun, protective, strength seeking and reassuring. With time, you can teach the child new strategies which are more adaptive to their new safe and caring home, but don't view their old strategies as 'problem behaviours' to be changed, modified or taken away. They may need them again in a future unfriendly situation.

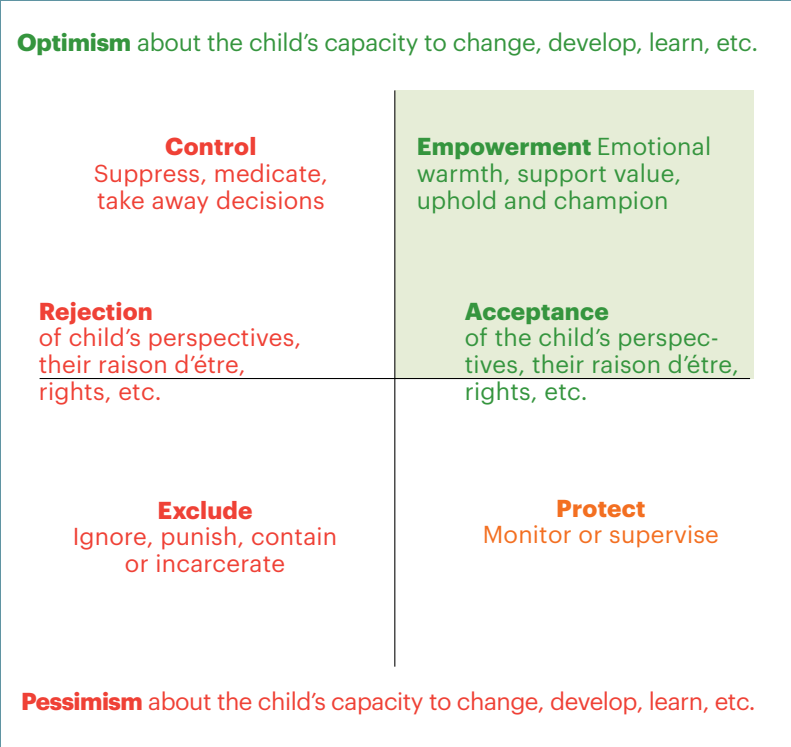
## How attitudes influence our beliefs and behaviour

Using published government statistics to show that so few children come into care because of their anti-social behaviour challenges the negative attitudes towards looked after children. When children pick up on negative attitudes, they can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

A study and diagram by Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut (2013) which looked at how attitudes and beliefs influence how people behave towards disabled people, has been adapted by us and applied to the attitudes and beliefs towards children in public care. We have used the same two dimensions - Relationships, with Rejection or Acceptance and Hope with Optimism or Pessimism, to illustrate how the views of people can change their attitudes and treatment towards the children in their care. In our training workshops, we use this model (Figure 2) to demonstrate the impact that different beliefs have on the behaviour of those in the parenting role, and the likely outcomes for children (negative in red, positive in green). The green area, 'Empowerment' is the best outcome for children. Rejection leading to exclusion or control are the



FIGURE 2- **How attitudes and beliefs influence our work with children**



Adapted from Nunkoosing and Haydon-Laurelut (2013)

attitudes and beliefs to be avoided as they harm children.

**Young people's strengths**

Using that optimism about the child's capacity to change, develop and learn can open so many possibilities and opportunities. A positive relationship with hope, emotional warmth, kindness and a drive to encourage the young person to find and use their strengths will not only be empowering but will also introduce fun and excitement into the child's life.

Young people using their strengths is not just about feeling good; a study by Wood, et al. (2010), found that using personal and psychological strengths resulted in increases in well-being over time: '... people who reported greater use of their strengths developed greater levels of well-being over time. Specifically, at both three- and six-month follow-up, greater strengths use was related to greater self-esteem, vitality, and positive affect, and lower perceived stress.'

A practical method to find and use strengths is to focus on your own strengths. Although modesty might stop you from sharing these, they are usually the things that you enjoy doing most. Your strengths give you energy, and you

are likely to be successful when you use them. Using Figure 3 below, scan the list of strengths and note your strengths, then get a trusted friend or partner to add their assessment of your strengths (they are likely to find more than you did). While this exercise will help you to identify many of your strengths, it is a stepping stone to turn your strength-seeking focus onto the young person in your care. Involve them, empower and delight them with your insights (based on your direct observations).

**Learning about and helping your child to find 'Flow'**

Flow is that great feeling we get when we are doing something we love, an activity that is challenging and involves using our strengths and skills. Often referred to as being 'in the zone' as when you experience it, negative thoughts melt away and your sense of time gets lost in your concentration as you attend fully to the task in hand.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) introduced the concept of 'Flow' in his book, 'Flow:-

The Psychology of Optimal Experi-

ence' in which he says: 'Contrary to what we usually believe... the best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile' (page 3).

In the parenting role, helping a young person to use their strengths and find 'flow' is not only empowering, it also generates positive energy and replaces negative thoughts and feelings. This involves finding the balance between the young person's skills and the level of the challenge. If the challenge is above the child's skill level, it will cause the child to be anxious, below their skill level will result in boredom. This is a dynamic process, as skill improves the challenge must increase to avoid boredom. If the challenge becomes too great, anxiety increases which may lead to the young person giving up. Getting the right balance results in 'flow' leading to growth and discovery.

**Learning from your child**

Two of the many strengths that even young children possess is creativity and ability to innovate (for an enlightening insight into these phenomena, watch the TEDx talk by Alison Gopnik or read her book, Gopnik, A. (2016) 'The Gardener and the Carpenter'). Younger children may not have the skills to articulate their hypothesis-testing analysis of their detailed observations, but intelligent adaptation involves understanding new people and situations. It also includes developing and testing strategies to keep themselves safe.

So, be in no doubt that your behaviour as their foster parent will be closely studied, analysed and subjected to numerous tests as part of the attachments process. Over time, if you respond consistently with an open mind, warmth, fun, sensitivity, responsiveness and kindness, the child will learn that you are safe and will start to enjoy their time with you. When that happens, consider yourself privileged as with mutual respect, trust and empathy your brain and the child's brain produce the hormone oxytocin making each of you more responsive to the other and more aware of each other's subtle social cues. ♦

FIGURE 3- **Our collection of 36 strengths – can you add more?**

<b>Adaptable</b> (blends into new situations)	<b>Attention to detail</b> (meticulous and careful)
<b>Active listener</b> (listening with both ears and eyes)	<b>Advocate</b> (supports others, defends their rights)
<b>Balanced</b> (can see both sides)	<b>Broadminded</b> (recognising differences and similarities)
<b>Calm and unflappable</b> (keeps a cool head in stressful situations)	<b>Committed</b> (dedicated, will stay the course)
<b>Cheerful</b> (pleasant and bright)	<b>Charismatic</b> (charming and inspires devotion in others)
<b>Completer/ finisher</b> (makes sure tasks have been completed)	<b>Communicator</b> (provides clear explanations and requests)
<b>Dependable</b> (reliable)	<b>Empathetic</b> (respond to others' feelings and emotions)
<b>Goes the extra mile</b> (does more than expected)	<b>Fair-minded</b> (tries to treat people equally)
<b>Forward-thinking</b> (planning ahead)	<b>Flexible</b> (responds to change and new situations)
<b>Forgiving</b> (doesn't hold grudges)	<b>Faithful</b> (loyal, consistent and devoted)
<b>Good humoured</b> (can laugh at self)	<b>Generous</b> (ready to give more than expected)
<b>Honest</b> (truthful and does not conceal information)	<b>Hopeful</b> (believes that things can be better)
<b>Insightful</b> (provides a deeper reason)	<b>Ingenious</b> (inventive, creative, imaginative & original)
<b>Light-hearted</b> (fun-loving)	<b>Optimistic</b> (thinks positively)
<b>Practical</b> (hands-on skills and knowledge)	<b>Self-aware</b> (recognises own strengths and weaknesses)
<b>Tension breaker</b> (deals with stressful events)	<b>Tenuous</b> (hangs on for a positive outcome)
<b>Thoughtful</b> (thinks about others and other situations)	<b>Trustworthy</b> (someone you can rely upon)
<b>Understanding</b> (considers the needs and hopes of others)	<b>Willing</b> (is always prepared to help)

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About the author:  
Colin Maginn is a director of the Pillars of Parenting ([www.pillarsofparenting.co.uk](http://www.pillarsofparenting.co.uk)) an organisation formed to improve the lives of children in public care by empowering adults in the parent role. You can find more of his articles, as well as peer-reviewed research studies and lots of interesting links and articles in their 'Library page' on their website. Colin has recently co-authored a book (with Dr Seán Cameron) *It's a privilege when a child in care is delighted it's you*. It is due to be published in early 2021.

