

## **Fosterline Wales Factsheet**

### **Building resilience and supporting the mental health needs of looked after children**

#### **Introduction**

Without intervention, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can affect a person for life. Adults who experienced four or more ACEs as children are at higher risk of poor emotional and physical health, and worse outcomes in general. Many looked after children in Wales have experienced four or more ACEs. The children who recover best from adversity are those with high levels of resilience and your own resilience capacity.

This factsheet explains more about resilience, and where you can learn practical ways to boost a child's resilience.

#### **What is resilience?**

Resilience is the ability to overcome significant adversity. It is a result of protective factors in the child's environment and the child's own coping skills.

Many looked after children have been through multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These include direct abuse or neglect, and growing up in adverse conditions such as domestic violence, parental alcohol or other drug misuse, or parental mental health issues. At the point they enter foster care, their health and development may already have been negatively affected. They may lack protective factors. They may not have had the opportunity to learn healthy coping skills.

*"Building resilience in the early years is essential to overcoming adversity and change in childhood and later life. Emotional wellbeing as a child is an important determinant of adult wellbeing. A supportive and loving relationship and secure attachment with a parent, family member or trusted adult are of significant importance to building resilience in childhood and adolescence, supporting good psychological functioning, healthy development and protection against adversity."*

*In adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly important. Children cope better if they are adaptive learners and problem-solvers, engage with other people, and have competence that they themselves value, and feelings of being valued by society."*

*Resilience has been shown to protect against poor childhood health, educational absenteeism, and mental ill-health in later life. Some of these*

*characteristics can be taught and building resilience in children over the longer-term can contribute towards resilient communities". Resilience: Understanding the interdependence between individuals and communities. Public Health Wales, 2019*

Children become resilient when they are supported by their caregiver:

- they experience stress emotionally and physiologically within a stable environment
- their caregiver provides reassurance, helping them to process and reflect on their experience and give practical support
- they stabilise and produce their own internal strengths and learn to use external supports
- they are better equipped for the next traumatic event.

Children who are not supported, experience adversity differently:

- the child experiences stress emotionally and psychologically
- the child is left unsupported and feeling uncared for
- the child is unable to stabilise and becomes chronically stressed
- the child is less equipped for the next traumatic event.

## **Protective factors**

Protective factors are things outside the child – their caregivers, relationships with siblings and significant others, friendships, their community, housing, income, education, leisure. The biggest single protective factor is a healthy attachment to their caregiver in the first few years of their life, and a secure psychological base from which to develop and explore the world. Building a secure base for the first time after the first few years is a challenging responsibility for foster carers. The Fostering Network's book [Attachment](#) explains this in more detail and contains practical tips for foster carers.

## **Relationships**

Children need relationships with affirming, reliable, trusting adults who care for them and care about them. Some children have this kind of relationship with one or more adults before they come into care. In this case, it is important to nurture that confidence in building appropriate relationships. However, many fostered children did not experience these kinds of relationships before coming into care. Even if you are a short term carer, you can make a profound difference to the child's life by acting as a secure base. This concept is explained in The Fostering Network book [Attachment](#), and the University of East Anglia's ['Secure Base Model'](#).

Foster carers provide a secure base when they are:

- available to the child or young person
- sensitive, and able to help the child manage their feelings
- accepting, and building the child's self-esteem

- co-operative, so the child feels they are valued, rather than passive and dependent
- including the child as part of the family, so the child feels they belong. Life story work and drawing up social network maps can also help a child develop a sense of identity and where they feel they belong.

## **Having a voice, feeling valued and making decisions**

Having a voice and knowing you are heard makes a huge difference to how you experience adversity. As well as listening to the child yourself, you can exert your advocacy role in supporting them to be heard by other professionals involved in their lives, such as their CLA Review or with their teachers and social workers.

Focusing on a child's strengths helps build confidence and self-esteem. It makes them feel valued and competent, which in turn boosts resilience.

Knowing how to make decisions about your life and being allowed to make your own decisions are important skills for resilience. You can support a child to learn to make decisions by making sure they have relevant information, understand the information, think through consequences of decisions and then know how to communicate clearly with those around them. If you support them to practise these skills on decisions that don't have a major impact on their life (eg what to wear or eat), they will be better equipped to make bigger decisions in the future.

## **Strengthening resilience in children:**

*“Providing a healthy context for development, particularly healthy family environments, supports the child's ability to develop skills to adapt and cope with change in later life, and gain the resources needed to function well, acting as a natural protective system across a child's development.....*

*Early interventions with a focus on enhancing positive child development, health and wellbeing are therefore critical to strengthening resilience across the life course.*

*The key features identified in this review for building resilience amongst children and young people are:*

- *building caring relationships,*
  - *parenting programmes*
  - *strengthening wider relationships*
- *promotion of good health,*
  - *physical health and mental wellbeing*
- *strengthening mental capital, and*
  - *building self-esteem, social and emotional skills, problem-solving, coping skills, adaptive cognitive approaches*
- *community-based approaches*
  - *whole school approach*
  - *whole-system approaches (family, school and community)*

- *enhancing participation through community engagement”*

Resilience: Public Health Wales, 2019

## **Activities to boost resilience**

- Healthy eating and regular physical exercise, particularly outdoors.
- Mindfulness, breathing exercises and relaxation techniques.
- Any activities done alongside supportive, positive adults.
- Positive time spent with friends, whether in person or online.
- Learning activities - these can be informal (eg learning to cook) or formal (eg school or after school activities).
- Sporting activities, particularly with a positive coach.
- Activities that promote self-control, confidence, weighing up consequences, adventure or experimentation, focus, emotional intelligence and planning ahead.

The Fostering Network’s books [Attachment](#) and [Education](#) have practical tips on how to do this. Working on these skills helps children recover from the negative effects of past ACEs and makes them more resilient to any future adversity.

## **Looking after yourself**

Resilience is not just for children. Foster carers experience adversity and need to make sure they have enough protective factors and strong enough coping skills to remain resilient. Growing your own resilience reduces your risk of burn-out and models the behaviours that will help your fostered child to become more resilient.

In the 2013 Annual Report, ‘Resilient and Resourceful Adults’, Executive Director of Public Health Wales, recommends adults to:

- Take responsibility for their own health, and that of their family.
- Keep active, eat well, drink alcohol responsibly and not smoke.
- Work together with health and social care professionals; share in the decisions that affect their health.
- Include the ‘Five ways to wellbeing’ in your everyday life: Connect, Be Active, Take notice, Keep learning, Give.
- Belong to a social network – be a part, not apart.
- Seek advice on how they / their family can get enough financial and other resources to participate in society.
- Find the best work that they can, paid or unpaid, that provides a meaningful role.
- Look after and enjoy the environment around them, and help others to do so.

## Additional Resources:

- Secure Base Model and other information, Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia, UK  
[uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/home](http://uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/home)
- What is Attachment? The Fostering Network.  
[thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/attachment](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/attachment)
- Promoting Resilience in Fostered Children SCIE Guide 6  
[hefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/attachment](http://hefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/looking-after-fostered-child/attachment)
- Promoting Emotional Health, Well-being and Resilience in Primary Schools, PPIW, 2016  
[wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PPIW-Report-Promoting-Emotional-Health-Well-being-and-Resilience-in-Primary-Schools-Final.pdf](http://wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/PPIW-Report-Promoting-Emotional-Health-Well-being-and-Resilience-in-Primary-Schools-Final.pdf)
- Emotional Intelligence  
[theguardian.com/teacher-network/2017/nov/03/emotional-intelligence-why-it-matters-and-how-to-teach-it](http://theguardian.com/teacher-network/2017/nov/03/emotional-intelligence-why-it-matters-and-how-to-teach-it)
- Resilience: Public Health Wales, 2019  
[phw.nhs.wales/files/research/resilience/resilience-understanding-the-interdependence-between-individuals-and-communities/](http://phw.nhs.wales/files/research/resilience/resilience-understanding-the-interdependence-between-individuals-and-communities/)
- Keeping Safe online  
Welsh Government [Hwb](#) has a wide variety of information, guidance and resources, including:
  - About digital resilience in education
  - Children and young people
  - Parents and carers
  - Resources
  - Support services

## How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

### Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time, please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us at:

[fosterlinewales@fostering.net](mailto:fosterlinewales@fostering.net)

### Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your

experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

[thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

For more information on the web for support, visit our [Social pedagogy in practice resource: Building resilience](#)

### **Training and consultancy**

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information contact our learning and development manager, Sarah Mobedji at [sarah.mobedji@fostering.net](mailto:sarah.mobedji@fostering.net).

### **Contact**

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:

The Fostering Network  
33 Cathedral Road  
Cardiff CF11 9HB

Telephone: 029 2044 0940

Email: [wales@fostering.net](mailto:wales@fostering.net)

Web: [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk)

Find us on Facebook: [facebook.com/thefosteringnetwork](https://facebook.com/thefosteringnetwork)

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