

# MAKING IT HAPPEN

*How foster carers can help children raise their aspirations and fulfil their ambitions in education*

**A TEACHER'S**

**5**

**TOP TIPS** for  
foster carers



**THE FOSTER FAMILY**

An experienced carer's  
perspective plus her top tips

**THE SCHOOL**

How one Welsh school  
supports fostered children

**The  
Fostering  
Network**  
**Rhwydwaith  
Maethu**

**SOME CHALLENGES  
THAT FOSTERED  
CHILDREN FACE**

Attachment difficulties,  
special educational  
needs and truancy

*'We value your support!'*

Young people tell us that  
their foster carers can  
really make a difference

# About The Fostering Network

***The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity. We are passionate about the difference foster care makes to children and young people. Transforming fostered children's lives is at the heart of everything we do.***

We are the essential network for foster care, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children, inspiring, motivating and supporting them to make foster care better. Together, we're a powerful catalyst for change, influencing and shaping fostering policy and practice at every level.

We work to ensure all fostered children have a positive experience of family life, supporting them to have high aspirations, to overcome the challenges of their early lives and to achieve their very best.

We help foster carers to improve children's lives. We champion the vital role they and their families play in helping fostered children, and work to ensure they are properly recognised, valued and supported.



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

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# WELCOME

Fostered children have dreams and ambitions – just like other children. When researchers interviewed looked after children in Wales in 2015<sup>1</sup> about what they wanted to be when they grew up, the children said they wanted to be hairdressers, teachers, farmers, police officers and vets. Some wanted to join the army, others wanted to work in childcare, some saw themselves as mechanics.

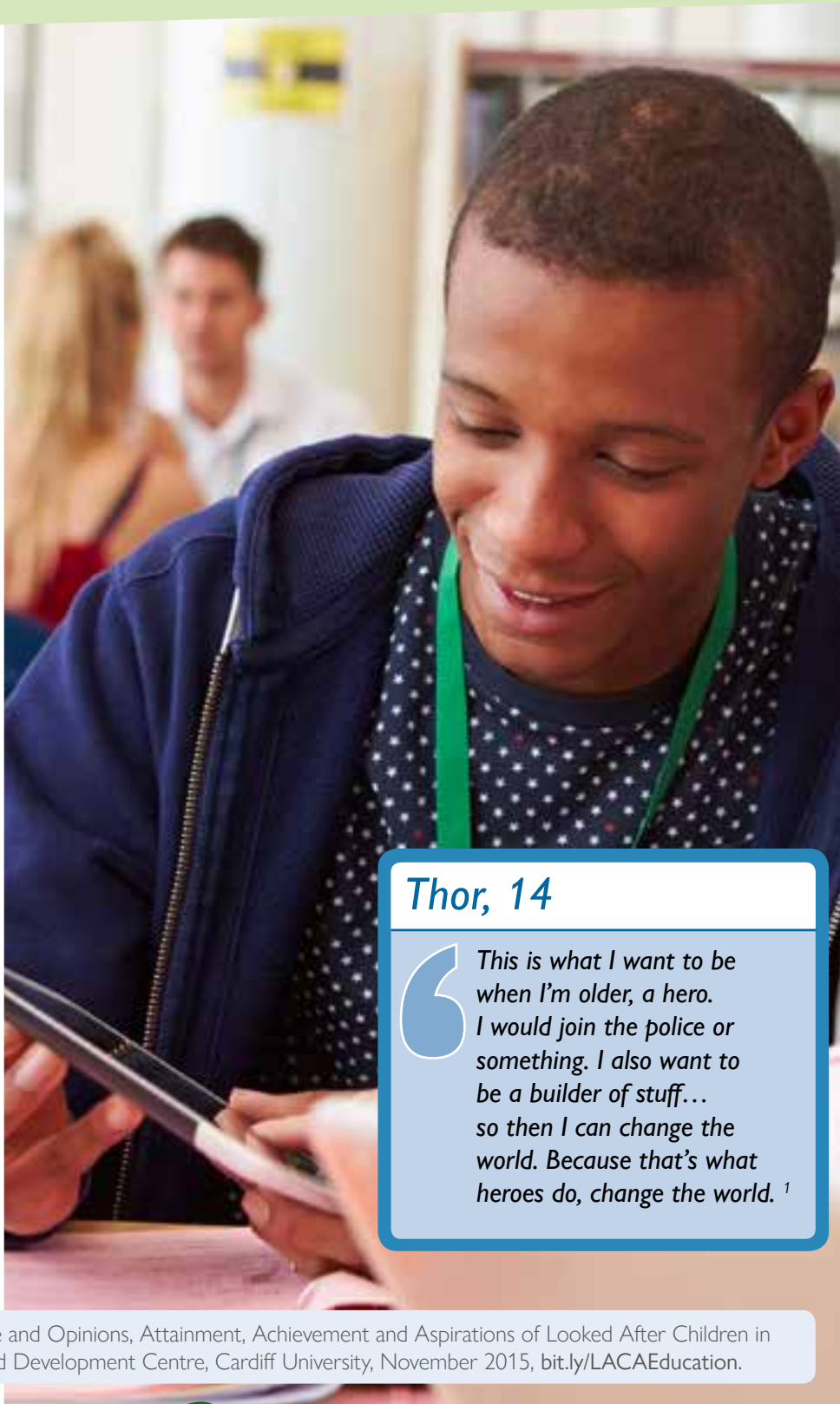


However, we know that too often children who have been looked after don't do well at school – they might struggle to fit in, have difficulties with learning or they may truant. Not enough of them go on to higher education and too many end up struggling as adults. Unfortunately, those happy childhood dreams may remain unfulfilled.

Foster carers can and do make a huge difference. They are an integral part of the team of professionals who support looked after children in all aspects of their lives, and often play the part of first educators.

This short publication aims to inspire you as foster carers to help the children in your care raise their academic aspirations and fulfil their potential in education. It gives you some starting points to help you understand the education system better. And it gives you some tips to help you consult, challenge and collaborate with schools and others, so that everyone can help fostered children to aim high and fulfil their educational dreams.

This publication accompanies *A Foster Carer's Guide to Education in Wales* which can be downloaded from [bit.ly/EduWales](https://bit.ly/EduWales)

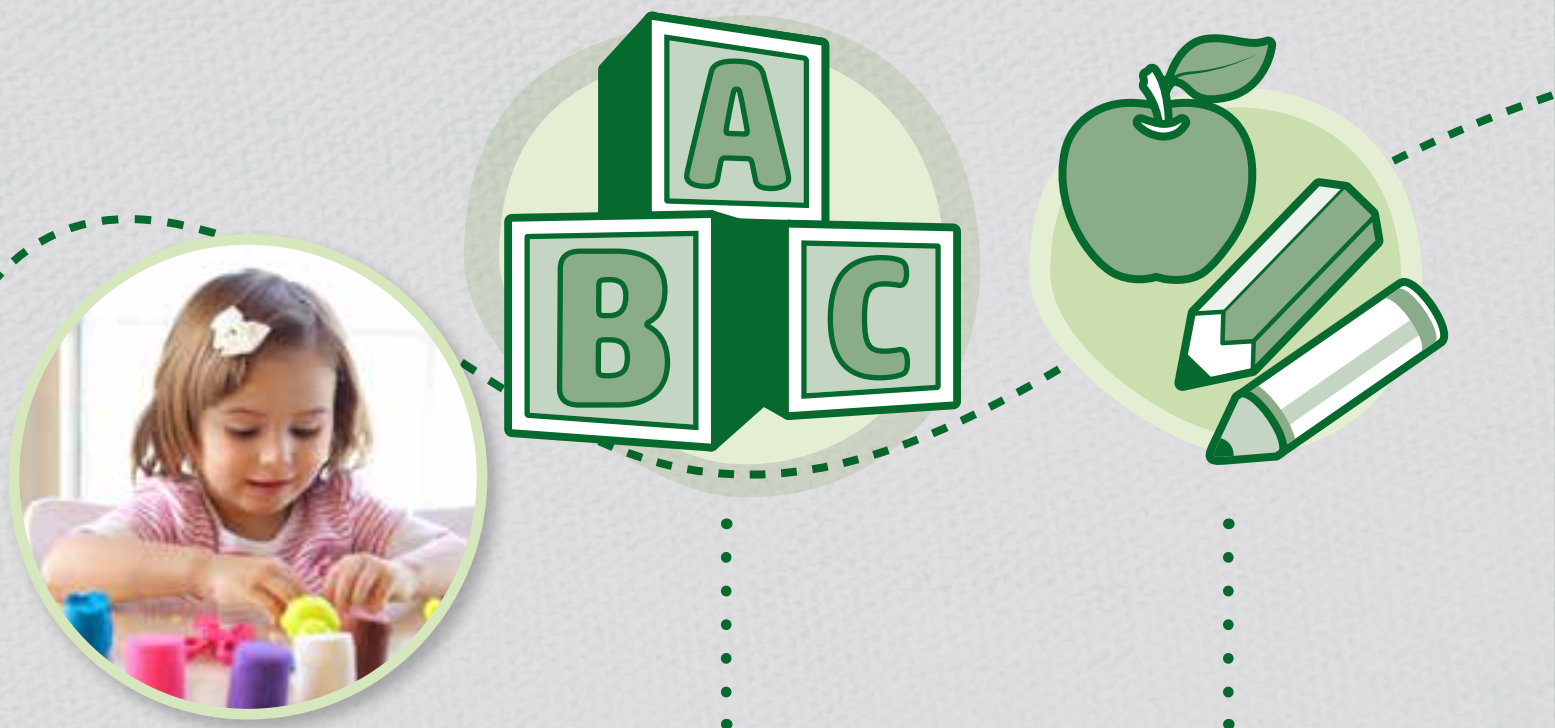


## Thor, 14

*This is what I want to be when I'm older, a hero. I would join the police or something. I also want to be a builder of stuff... so then I can change the world. Because that's what heroes do, change the world. <sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Understanding the Educational Experience and Opinions, Attainment, Achievement and Aspirations of Looked After Children in Wales, Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre, Cardiff University, November 2015, [bit.ly/LACAEducation](https://bit.ly/LACAEducation).

# The education system in Wales



Institution	Nursery	Primary school (also applies to Pupil referral units)	
Key stage	Foundation phase	Key stage 2	
School year	Pre-school to year 2	Years 3-6	
Age	3-7 (compulsory school age starts at 5)	7-11	
Exams/assessments	Assessments in literacy and numeracy	Assessments in literacy and numeracy	
The paperwork for looked after children	Personal Education Plan (PEP)		

For more detail, see *A Foster Carer's Guide to Education in Wales* [bit.ly/EduWales](https://bit.ly/EduWales)





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	Secondary school (also applies to Pupil referral units)		Sixth form college Further education college Training Work	University, Training and Work.
	Key stage 3	Key stage 4	Post-16	
	Years 7-9	Years 10-11	Years 12-13	
	11-14	14-16 (compulsory schooling ends at 16)	16-18	
	Assessments in all subjects	GCSEs Welsh Baccalaureate Pre-entry ASDAN BTEC NVQ	A/S levels A levels Welsh Baccalaureate	
			Pathway Plan	



# THE SCHOOL

## A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE



Schools can do a lot to help fostered children get on well with their lessons and their classmates. We find out how Cardiff's Whitchurch High School aims to get the best out of all of its students.

*'It's important that our students have high expectations, regardless of their circumstances,'* says Steve Hodnett (pictured above), assistant headteacher at Whitchurch High School, a comprehensive secondary school in Cardiff.

Steve explains that even though some children in foster care may face more challenges than others, Whitchurch High School has a culture of high expectations for all children, no matter what their personal circumstances, which is constantly reinforced.

A close relationship between school staff and foster carers is vital to help these messages get through. Steve emphasises the importance of foster carers sending a consistent message in terms of standards and expectations, supporting school policies and attending key events.

There are several strategies that the school has in place to help its more vulnerable students to fulfil their potential.

The approach that runs through everything, Steve explains, is to make every student feel valued, and that they belong within the school community.

*'Sometimes children in foster care feel that they are different, with a label of being a looked after child, but we want to ensure that they feel no less important than any of the other students,'* he says.

Some fostered children have difficulties, such as being less emotionally resilient, having mental health issues, or they find it hard to develop trusting relationships with adults, and the school works hard to help them overcome these.

*'It's important for us to understand the challenges that these young people face and the experiences that they have come through,'* says Steve.

*'Some struggle with peer relationships and struggle to fit in because they feel different.'*

*'We can help them to develop strategies to deal with things.'*

The school has a counsellor on-site and a mentor. There are also two programmes available to help children develop their social skills.

There is a strong link between school attendance and GCSE results, so Whitchurch High School encourages high levels of attendance. Steve explains that weekly meetings with the school's attendance officer flag up children who aren't attending, and work is done to encourage them back into the school routine, with a phased return plan if necessary.

Returning to those high expectations time and time again is crucial. Steve emphasises: *'Some children say to me, 'I can't go to uni, none of my family have been.' And I say to them, 'Be the first!'*



## STEVE'S 5 TOP TIPS FOR FOSTER CARERS

- 1 **Show an interest**, but don't ask, 'What did you do at school today?' because the answer will inevitably be, 'nothing'. Try saying: 'Tell me three things you learned in geography today.'
- 2 **Be consistent** in supporting the school's policies regarding attendance, behaviour and uniform. Don't compromise by, for example, letting a child wear the wrong item of uniform.
- 3 **Attend key school events.** Some fostered children may have come from a background where their families weren't interested in what went on at school. So if a foster carer goes to sports matches, performances and parents' evenings, that is sending a message that they value the child and the importance education plays in preparing them for the future.
- 4 **Help with basic organisational skills**, such as packing the child's bag the night before to ensure that they have their homework organised and the right equipment. If a child has come from a disorganised background, they might need extra help with this sort of thing.
- 5 **Share key information with teachers** about changes in circumstances. If a child has contact with their family, it is not only likely to affect their behaviour at home, but also at school. Help the school anticipate this so they are better able to deal with it.

### What do schools and local authorities have to do to support fostered children?

- ▶ Every looked after child must have a Personal Education Plan (PEP), which is part of their overall Care and Support Plan. It must be reviewed with foster carers, the school and the child whenever the Care and Support Plan is reviewed.
- ▶ Local authorities should designate a looked after children's education co-ordinator (LACE) to co-ordinate PEPs and monitor the progress of looked after children and care leavers within the local authority.
- ▶ The governing body of all maintained schools in Wales must designate a member of staff to have responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of looked after children in the school.

### How looked after children fare in education in Wales

- ▶ At foundation phase, **58%** of looked after children met the expected level compared with **85%** of all children.
- ▶ At key stage 2, **59%** of looked after children met the expected level compared with **86%** of all children.
- ▶ At key stage 3, **46%** of looked after children met the expected level, compared with **81%** of all children.
- ▶ **17%** of looked after children achieved five GCSEs at grade A\*-C (including English/Welsh and maths), compared with **55%** of all children. (The above figures are from 31 March 2014)
- ▶ **40%** of care leavers were not in employment, education or training on their 19th birthday. (The above figure is from 2015)



#### Note

Statistics quoted in *Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales Strategy*, Welsh Government, January 2016, [bit.ly/RAEAttainment](http://bit.ly/RAEAttainment).



# The foster family

## — a foster carer's perspective

*Knowledge is power, is the message that Welsh foster carer Jocelyn and her family emphasise to every child in their house.*

*Jocelyn is an experienced foster carer. She explains how she's persuaded some of the most reluctant young people to engage with education.*

*'We are a family that believes in getting the best out of the education system,' she says. 'No-one is allowed not to go to school and we show them that school is important.'*

Jocelyn has been fostering since 2009 and she's had to work hard with several children to help them get back into school life. For example, one teenage girl had been involved in sex work and saw no value in school, one young boy was regularly excluded from his special school and another, who was on probation, had so many people involved in his reviews that he found them completely overwhelming and couldn't participate.

One of the family's current fostered teenagers, 14-year-old Gareth is planning to go university to study engineering. But when he started living with the family three years ago, he was only attending school 50 per cent of the time.

*'Education to him then was boring. School was a place where people told him what to do,' says Jocelyn. 'At home he was used to being the adult.'*

*His mum wanted him at home with her, being her carer. He had planned to leave school at 16 to look after her all the time.'*

Today, Jocelyn says, he has 100 per cent attendance rate, he goes to after-school activities and he's mixing with children his own age.

*'We gave him a consistent message that education is important,' explains Jocelyn. 'We started by getting him the right uniform so he didn't stand out, and we got his hair cut.'*

The family took advantage of Gareth's natural curiosity and intelligence.

*'We tried lots of things with him to see what he'd be interested in' says Jocelyn. 'My husband is ex-military and we went to the Kennedy Space Center in the USA on holiday and we filled his mind with information. We watch programmes on TV with him and try to answer his questions.'*

It helps that the family has a daughter at university who can provide a role model. *'I take fostered children with me to visit her at university,' says Jocelyn.*

*'On the way in the car, we talk about university and what you can achieve.'*

Jocelyn has worked hard to engage with teachers and other school staff to help children in her care to thrive. She goes to parents' evenings, which helps to demonstrate to the children that school is important and the family cares about it.

This, she admits, can be frustrating sometimes too. *'Some teachers let children get away with punching below their weight,' she says. 'I will challenge the teachers to push the children.'*

The most important thing is consistency, she believes. It's about emphasising the importance of getting educated.

*'Every evening we sit around the table and talk about what has happened at school,' she says. 'Virtually every child who has been here has said that they weren't used to people taking such an interest in them, and I tell them that they need to do well at school to get a better life and have prospects for their future.'*





## JOCELYN'S 5 TOP TIPS for foster carers

- 1 **Ask for things to be explained to you** if you don't understand how they work. Don't be embarrassed that you don't know, because each local authority and each school is different.
- 2 **Don't be afraid to challenge the teachers** to have high expectations for the children. Some teachers let children get away with punching below their weight.
- 3 **Discourage meetings from taking place during school hours**, such as looked after children reviews. It's embarrassing for the children because all their friends know why they've been taken out of the classroom, and they miss important teaching time.
- 4 **If you need help with homework, ask for it.** Homework is tough – for foster carers too! Some schools run classes, for example, in maths, to help parents and carers boost their skills.
- 5 **Demonstrate that you believe school is important** by going to parents' evenings and getting into a dialogue with the teachers.

## The other professionals you may encounter at school...

### Designated teacher for looked after children

All maintained schools are required by law to have a member of school staff responsible for looked after children. This should be a senior member of staff who has a lead role in promoting the educational experience of looked after children. They should make themselves known to the child as someone they can confide in, who will take their issues seriously and will help manage them. This person should be your first point of contact if you have any general concerns about your child's education or wellbeing in school.

### Looked after children's education (LACE) co-ordinator

LACE co-ordinators' exact roles are defined by individual local authorities. They are there to make sure that fostered children get any additional support they need with education, and are based within the social care or education departments of the local authority. A LACE co-ordinator can act as your gateway to the information or support you and your fostered child need.

### Special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO)

A member of school staff with responsibility for monitoring all students who need additional support and making sure that they get any assessments or reviews that they need. Following recent legislation, special educational needs co-ordinators will soon become known as additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCOs).

### Educational psychologist

An educational psychologist works with children to support their development and emotional wellbeing. This is especially important for children – including those who are looked after – who might face additional barriers in education.



## Delegated authority for foster carers

**Delegated authority enables foster carers to make common sense, everyday decisions about the children and young people they care for, to help give them as normal lives as possible.**

With delegated authority, foster carers can take responsibility for many things related to education, including attending parents' evenings and signing consent forms for school trips. This means that children don't miss out on things by having to wait for consent to arrive from someone who doesn't see them every day.

Holders of parental responsibility (the local authority and/or the parents) delegate authority to foster carers to undertake such tasks and make these decisions. Clarifying when authority is delegated depends on many factors; including the age of the child, legal status and care plan.

# Some challenges that fostered children face



Fostered children may have a few extra difficulties to cope with than their peers. Here are some of the most common which may have an effect on their day-to-day life at school.

## Attachment difficulties

Foster carers know – from their first days of training – that the children in their care may have difficulties with attachment, which will affect their behaviour and development. But teachers may have less awareness of the issue.

Unmet attachment needs can lead to social, behavioural and emotional difficulties. There are many ways that these difficulties may express themselves: children may be defiant or aggressive, they may not have many friends and be unable to accept help. When the child has experienced neglect, trauma, abuse or loss these difficulties and others may be severe.

Children with attachment difficulties may find transitions difficult – between lessons, school years and, in particular, between schools. Their working memory and organisational skills may be poor. What's more, their self-esteem may be low, making them react unexpectedly in some situations.

These issues can be challenging for school staff to deal with. Foster carers can help by explaining to teachers how your child may react in certain circumstances and what strategies work for them.

## Special educational needs

Around two-thirds of looked after children in Wales have some sort of special educational need, according to the Welsh Government's Children in Need Census 2015 [bit.ly/CiNCensus](http://bit.ly/CiNCensus)

This is well above the Welsh national average of 22 per cent of the general school population. Most of these children are in mainstream schools, although 9 per cent of looked after children are in special schools (compared with less than 1 per cent of the general population). Thirteen per cent of looked after children have a disability.

The most frequent types of special educational needs associated with looked after children are emotional and behavioural difficulties. Certain behaviours can act as a mask for other issues, or a means of conveying problems that the child hasn't found another way of communicating.

Not all children with disabilities or medical conditions will have special educational needs, and having a different first language is not considered a special educational need.

Only some children with special educational needs have a statement of special educational needs.

There are two types of difficulty that are becoming increasingly recognised among specialists. These are speech, language and communication needs and foetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

### Speech, language and communication needs

Some children have difficulties in talking or understanding other people – there is a spectrum of difficulties, ranging from a child having difficulty in pronouncing words to being unable to read social cues such as facial expressions. Once a difficulty has been identified, speech and language therapy can help, but foster carers will also need to liaise with the school's special educational needs co-ordinator.

### Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders

Experts believe that more children than we might think – especially those in the care system – have some damage to their brains and bodies from their mothers drinking during pregnancy. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders encompass a wide range of effects including vision impairment, speech and language delays, memory problems, hyperactivity and inappropriate social behaviour. These can have an enormous impact on a child's school life and prospects.

## Truancy

It is a legal requirement that children attend school regularly and on time. Truancy can lead to lower exam results as well as giving young people the opportunity to get involved in criminal activity or antisocial behaviour.

However, children from disordered backgrounds or families where the importance of attending school isn't emphasised, may struggle with their attendance. A pattern of missing school can develop for a number of reasons, including anxiety with settling in, bullying, stress around school work and unhappiness about the child's family situation.

As foster carers, you are responsible for ensuring that children attend school and, if they don't, to make sure they get the support they need. If truancy is regular, a meeting should be called without delay between the foster carer, social worker and the school, to discuss possible causes and prevention.



# Young people say: 'We value your support!'



## Sophie

Sophie is 17 and she has been in foster care since she was six. She is currently studying at college.

*'School wasn't too bad. My best GCSE result was English, which I got a B for. My English teacher was really supportive. She was actually saying that I could do it and that I was doing really well – it made me think I could do it.'*

*'My foster carers went to every parents' evening and made sure I had everything I needed, like the right things in my bag, a laptop and a desk at home in my room.'*

*'It wasn't the best being taken out of lessons for meetings. Most people in care don't like that. Everyone in class sees that you've got to do this thing, but it's up to me if I wanted to tell them I was in care. And I don't think all the teachers needed to know I was in care.'*

*'After college I'm hoping to get a job in a sports centre. I've already got lots of the qualifications I need for that.'*

*'I'd say to other young people, don't let being in care hold you back – just go for it!'*

## Ali



*'My foster carer helped me when I needed it and even though I may not have appreciated it at the time, I am thankful for that support now.'*<sup>1</sup>

## Bob

When Bob, 15, moved to a new area, his new foster carers involved him in deciding which school to enrol in and encouraged him to have high expectations.

*'I had a tour around the school, I was like, 'this is nice, I like this'. And I knew about and I researched the other schools around it, I was like, 'I'm not going to get anywhere where I can get better qualifications.'*<sup>2</sup>



## Connor



Connor, 13, wanted to join the army. His foster carer's attitude bolstered his self-belief.

*'My foster carer said I could make it if I try hard enough and I train hard enough like I do.'*<sup>2</sup>

## Nadine

Nadine, 21, said her foster carer believed in her and always told her she could go to university.

*'My foster carer at the time, she was like, 'you're going to be that one per cent [who study at university]'. And I don't know, it kind of just put a little bit more belief in me and it just made me want to do it that little bit more.'*<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Young person interviewed by Voices from Care in Education, What it Means to Me, 2015, [bit.ly/EWIMTM](http://bit.ly/EWIMTM)

<sup>2</sup> These interviews are from Understanding the Educational Experience and Opinions, Attainment, Achievement and Aspirations of Looked After Children in Wales, Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre, Cardiff University, November 2015.

# More information

## Education in general

*A Foster Carer's Guide to Education in Wales*, Maria Boffey and John Galloway, The Fostering Network, 2016

[bit.ly/EduWales](http://bit.ly/EduWales)

*Children in Need Census*, Welsh Government [bit.ly/CiNCensus](http://bit.ly/CiNCensus)

*Education*, Anne Collis, The Fostering Network, 2008

*Raising the Ambitions and Educational Attainment of Children who are Looked After in Wales Strategy*, Welsh Government, January 2016  
[bit.ly/RAEAttainment](http://bit.ly/RAEAttainment)

*Thrive*, a special education issue of the magazine published by The Fostering Network for fostered young people in Wales [bit.ly/TFNthrive](http://bit.ly/TFNthrive)

*Understanding the Educational Experience and Opinions, Attainment, Achievement and Aspirations of Looked After Children in Wales*, Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre, Cardiff University, November 2015  
[bit.ly/LACAEducation](http://bit.ly/LACAEducation)

## Attachment

*Building Relationships Through Storytelling: A foster carer's guide to attachment and stories*, Steve Killick, Maria Boffey, The Fostering Network, 2012 [bit.ly/BRTStorytelling](http://bit.ly/BRTStorytelling)

*Getting it Right for Every Child* helps schools and parents understand the educational needs of adopted children. The strategies in the guide describe good practice for all children who may experience attachment issues. See [adoptionuk.org/resources](http://adoptionuk.org/resources).

## Delegated authority

The Fostering Network's website has more information here  
[bit.ly/DelAuth](http://bit.ly/DelAuth)

## Speech, language and communication difficulties

Afasic [afasic.org.uk](http://afasic.org.uk)

iCan [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk)

## Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders

The National Clinic for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders [fasdclinic.com](http://fasdclinic.com)

FASD Trust [fasdtrust.co.uk](http://fasdtrust.co.uk)

National Organisation for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome UK [nofas-uk.org](http://nofas-uk.org)

## Training

The Fostering Network has created an online education training course for foster carers, available UK-wide. The online education course empowers foster carers to know their role in helping children and young people to succeed, explore overcoming barriers to learning and learn more about the education system. Visit [thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/training-consultancy/training-foster-carers/online-training](http://thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/get-involved/training-consultancy/training-foster-carers/online-training)

The Fostering Network can also provide an in-house training course on education, tailored to meet your service's needs. Contact our Wales learning and development manager Sarah Mobedji via [sarah.mobedji@fostering.net](mailto:sarah.mobedji@fostering.net)

**The  
Fostering  
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**Rhwydwaith  
Maethu**

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