

**Children Who Foster Report:**

Foster Care Queensland (“FCQ”) is committed to representing Foster Carer families, where too often there is focus on the impact of fostering on foster carers and little regard or thought occurs for Natural children who find themselves in a family who has decided to care for other people’s children.

This lack of focus is evident when reviewing Queensland’s application process to become foster carers, right through to exiting as a carer. Other than a space within the initial assessment, where all household members must be interviewed, there is no other formal processes which recognise natural children and the impact of fostering on them. The Exit Interview report completed by FCQ (2011-2012) highlighted this as an issue, with many comments from foster parents centring on their belief that they were expected to place the needs of the foster care system ahead of their own children. It would seem that our Child Protection system in Queensland finds it difficult to consider fostering as a family experience, rather they view it as a foster parent experience and therefore natural children’s needs are often ignored and neglected. The impact of this can include placement breakdowns, carers exiting the system or natural children within a system that they learn to dislike. .

There has been little research completed in the area of Natural around the world, again this highlights that this subject has been grossly neglected. Foster Carer and FAST delegate, Donna Saurine is currently undertaking her Masters in Social Work and has completed a literature review on Natural children; this is attached and marked with the letter A.

FCQ has undertaken a project in this area to start to gain some understanding as to the experiences of natural children from the point of entry, right through to point of exit. The purpose of FCQ seeking this information is to guide us in providing recommendations to Child Safety which will improve the experiences for Natural children and no doubt have the ripple effect of improving placement stability for foster children and retention of foster families.

In 2010, FCQ sent out a survey for natural children to complete, the results of this are attached and marked with the letter ‘B’. Whilst this information was useful and certainly gave FCQ a starting point, we felt the need to meet with Natural children one on one, to truly gauge their experiences within this system.

Melinda Ensbey a Social Work Student through Australian Catholic University, came to FCQ to complete her first year placement in July 2012, FCQ saw this as a significant opportunity to complete a project around Natural Children. A plan was developed which saw FCQ set up Focus groups around Queensland in each of the Regions. Our Project Officer at the time, Karen Chamberlain travelled with Melinda to the Regions to sit with the Natural children and discuss their experiences. FCQ engaged in fun activities with the Young people to assist in discussion and expression of their experiences, this included art work, where by young people were asked to complete a Puzzle piece which illustrated their experiences in being part of a foster family. Attached and marked with the letter ‘C’ is a photo of all the puzzle pieces.

Unfortunately FCQ did not have the response we hoped, this resulted in FCQ having to cancel Central Regions visit and limited numbers in others. However we did meet with 30 children all up and believe that this is enough of a representation for the results to have some significance, particularly as the results are very similar to the survey results of 2010 and consistent with literature review.

Most importantly, we have given these children a voice and with the results can with some certainty provide recommendations to Child Safety.

Please note, all children/Young People interviewed were between the ages of 10 and 16 years of age.

There was a clear theme from children around time, fun and love being the best things about their family. Some of the quotes provided by children included:

‘ *There is always something happening, so many laughs, kids are funny and we do heaps with them’*

*‘ They are very loving, caring and always understand me’*

*‘ We love to be together’*

*‘ We have our own family time and looking after other kids is great’*

It is concerning that 57% of children and young people reported that they knew nothing – or very little about fostering before children came to stay. There appears to be a held belief the responsibility to inform children and young people of the impact of fostering lies with their parents, however this is simply not realistic, when they themselves have no idea what to expect. There is an absolute responsibility for the system to have better resources and information specifically for Natural children which provides a realistic and informative view of what fostering may mean for them within the context of a foster family.

Some of the responses provided by children and young people in this section included;

*‘nothing, not a family choice, it’s a mum and dad’s choice’*

*‘nothing, I was young, I had no idea why they came over’*

*‘children got taken away from their family and sent to another one’*

*‘not much ah, I knew that kids need a home and families let them stay with them’*

It is reasonable for children and young people to have lots of questions about foster children who are coming to live in their home. Children and Young people by their very nature are curious and therefore wanting to have an understanding about who the person is they are sharing a house with is only natural. The themes in this section seem to be reasonable requests from children, that is they want to know about a child’s background is and what behaviours they have. It is interesting that if foster parents were asked the same question, that it is likely that the responses would be very similar. The reason for wanting the knowledge is not about prying into a child’s life, rather having an understanding of why they are in their home so that they too can support the child or young person and know what to expect from them.

Some of the comments included;

‘*I wanted to know how hard it would be with some kids who have really bad problems and don’t even want to be living with you’*

*‘would have liked to know some of the problems they come with’*

*‘who we were going to get, the first was inappropriate and we were inexperienced’*

*‘if they have behavioural problems so we can help’*

It is very humbling to see the amount of children and young people who provided positive comments in this section

*‘Good sometimes, because I know I am helping, but sometimes I do want mum to myself’*

*‘Happy because he is younger and I give him my toys that I have grown out of ‘*

*‘I mind sharing my parents, but don’t like sharing my things’*

*‘Good because I know that I am helping a child’*

*‘generous, helping, cause when a child comes into my home, I know I am helping him/her family’*

*‘It makes me feel fine, because I have my own things that the kids aren’t allowed to touch and we have strict rules, so I feel safe sharing my home, parents and valuables’*

Whilst mostly positive comments, we can’t ignore the children and young people who did not feel ok about sharing all of these precious things in their life, some comments included:

‘*I don’t care anymore…….except none of them really thank us’*

*‘Jealous and embarrassed’*

*‘I get really annoyed when the disrespect our family or embarrass us, I also get mum and dad spend more time with the foster kids than they do with me and my sisters’*

*‘Can be annoying, would be nice to have mum and dad ourselves, if you share with them they keep asking for stuff which is annoying, respite helps’.*

It is interesting that see that one child has provided a solution in stating that respite helps. However carers can sometimes be criticised for having respite to refocus on their own family as this can be seen by Child Safety as excluding foster children. FCQ would argue in these instances that foster families absolutely have a right to spend time with their natural children to assist them in their ongoing acceptance of being part of a foster family. Whislt we would not advocate that foster children are excluded from all family holiday’s or events, as this is clearly not appropriate, foster families should have the option of now and then having a weekend to themselves to refocus as a family.

This is a very interesting outcome from the interviews, with 87% of children and young people reporting that they feel responsible for kids in their home. Examples provided by the children and young people included;

*‘sometimes I babysit for an hour or two, I don’t want to be any more responsible as she does not listen to me’*

*‘I do help out and I like it, but there are lots of time I don’t get to do what I want, because I have to help’*

*‘being the eldest, I am usually in charge of things to make sure no one gets hurt when we are playing out the back’*

*‘yes, makes me feel like I have to be good, because they copy me’*

*‘yes I feel like I have to take my free time and give it to them’*

This is a very interesting area for thought. In most families, it is natural for older siblings to take on some responsibility for their younger siblings; this could include anything from getting a nappy for mum or dad, to things such as watching younger sibling while mum is taking a shower to older siblings baby sitting while mum and dad go out. Therefore there can be an expectation from foster parents that their children will naturally take on similar roles with foster children, however the difference can be, that there is not a natural bond and these children have experienced trauma and therefore their behaviours and responses to situations can be very challenging. It would seem in reflecting on this information that foster parents should be better informed at time of training as to the differences in these situations so they can make more informed decisions around the responsibilities that they allow their children to take on.

The information clearly indicates that expectations placed on natural children are high and it would appear that this is the case because often the foster children are much younger and therefore they are expected to role model appropriate behaviours. It would be fair to state that there seems to be a held belief from foster parents that their children should behave much better because they have not experienced trauma

Some of the comments provided by children and young people included;

*‘there is more discipline on me, I have to act maturely, discipline is different because I am older’*

*‘yes, but there are only little, but they do copy behaviours, hard to be disciplined the same i.e. 18 vs 3 year old’*

*‘I am older now so this is not much of an issue….I don’t like that I have to set an example and am restricted in some of my friends coming over’*

*‘yes but I get bigger consequences’*

*‘I am expected to behave better so that the foster child has someone to look up to’*

*‘yes I am expected to set an example, no its not equal because there are rules for foster children about discipline’*

Natural children were split down the line with this question, some of the responses included;

*‘some we are happy to see go, but heart broken if we have had a long time….especially the ones that we have now, when they went back for a year, it ripped my heart out to see them go’*

*‘sometimes sad depending on who they are, sometimes happy because they are annoying’*

*‘back to a normal household because no more screaming’*

*‘relief ……it’s like saying goodbye to a friend after a sleep over’*

*‘I usually miss them a fair bit’*

*‘I have more space and feel like my parents actually know I am here’*

*‘sad because I loose a friend and I can’t play anymore’*

*‘sad because I want to talk to them and see how they are going’*

*‘happy because we can go on holidays’*

It must be noted, that whilst 67% reported no issues, that many of these responses were due to the natural children stating that they did not attend the same school, because (a) they were at high school and the foster children at primary, or (b) the children in their care were too young to attend school. Of those who reported it being an issue, some of the responses were;

‘*some kids at my school are mad at me because they think all foster families are mean to foster children, so some other foster kids do pick on me’*

*‘yes because they embarrass me with their behaviours’*

*‘because ???? is in grade 6 I see him a lot, and seeing him being suspended almost every week gets really embarassing’*

It is interesting the varied response in this area and FCQ would argue that with better education and information provided to natural children, they would have a better understanding of what to say and why when asked such questions. This is an area that foster parents are actually trained on during their pre-service quality training, therefore if we believe that adults need training and understanding around this area, then surely we should be providing age appropriate training for natural children too and not just expect foster parents to impart this knowledge on their children.

It is interesting that this is one area that natural children may feel they have some control over and in most situations it appears they make a decision to keep their friends to themselves. This may represent the one area in life where they have something that is just theirs.

‘*I try to keep them to myself….. but they try and follow us’*

*‘I introduce them, but keep my friends to myself’*

*‘I try not to be rude and we go to my room’*

*‘I only introduce them if my friends are sleeping over’*

*‘If they are little, my friends and I adore them, but if they have issues we don’t’*

The overwhelming response in this section is that having foster children can be fun, it is interesting that when you look at the Exit Interview data, that the overwhelming response from foster parents when asked what the best thing about fostering is – is the children. It seems very clear through all FCQ’s survey’s, that if it was just about the children, fostering would be so much easier. It is the other things that come with fostering that appear to complicate things, such as the systems that foster families are faced with on a day to day basis

*‘they play with me and I give them my stuff that I don’t use anymore’*

*‘Even though our foster child has physical problems h*e is happy and I have learnt not to judge a book by its cover’

*‘they all have different personalities and we have heaps of fun, seeing them grow up and we always try to do heaps with them’*

*‘knowing you are helping kids who have been through a lot’*

*‘a big family can be fun, even though they don’t know it, we are helping them’*

*‘that I can get experience with younger kids’*

*‘the feeling I know I am helping her in my own little way’*

Natural children having to face behavioural problems appears to be the one thing that they find the most difficult thing to deal with, it is interesting the amount of children who also put having stressed parents as being very difficult. Some of the comment’s made

*‘mum is always busy dealing with the department, schools etc, so it takes her away from me, they break things and don’t respect all things at the start’*

*‘’they aren’t related to me and some people think they are, their behaviour reflects onto our family and they don’t’ appreciate what we do…..they are mean and I get angry with them and I feel sad about being angry with them….everyone in my family has changed and they all act differently, its always so loud and they call people in our family terrible things’*

*‘the amount of breakages !* *. I can’t really spend much time with mum that much and I don’t have much time to study and now they touch everything in my room’*

*‘having to share, having her steal my stuff and hurting me and knowing I can’t do anything’*

*‘I have to share my parents, they’re always naughty so they spend all their time disciplining them’*

*‘they get special treatment, for example a girl my age in care gets everything paid driving lessons, centrelink payments, everything for a house to move out. They don’t have to do all that for themselves and I have to watch them complain about getting nothing’*

*‘sometimes when they have tantrums and yell, it can be stressful and the two little kids that we look after now have slow development, so its sometimes hard when they don’t understand you or you don’t understand them’*

*‘they are very disrupting, I can’t get school work done and I get blamed for stirring them up’*

A common theme in this section appears to be the desire from natural to have more space/time physically, however also as a family, again the theme of respite seemed to come through as one solution from natural children. Comments included:

*‘bigger house would be nice so I could have more space’*

*‘that we could spend more time with each other’*

*‘for the better off of the family, I would change to not having foster children’*

*‘no everything is great and I am grateful for what I have got’*

*‘more time with my parents’*

*‘to be less busy and to have more quiet’*

This is a very important topic and one where too often natural children are forgotten. We seem to place a lot of emphasis on the grief and loss experienced by foster parents when children leave their care, however little thought is given to the natural children, whom in many cases have developed significant sibling like attachments to children placed in their home.

Overwhelmingly and without much surprise, so many natural children said that they would like to be able to see the children again. This is often a taboo subject, particularly if the children have been returned to their natural parents, it is seen as something that simply can not occur. However this may not always be the case and it should be looked at on a case by case situation. Also remembering that contact does not just have to take the form of face to face, but could involve, letter, e-mail or phone.

‘ I would like her to be albe to come over and see her when she wants’

‘I would like to see them ok and know that they are ok’

‘being able to contact or at least find out what they are up to after they leave’

‘to be told in advance’

‘more notice’

‘the acknowledgement of the hard work put into the kids by my mum’

‘get to see them once every couple of months’

‘to know that I could see them again, if I wish’

Finally children and young people were asked if they had three wishes what would they be, some examples were

‘that the foster child was not rude and horrible to me’

‘Spend more time with mum, get more time to myself’

‘Sometimes for the foster children to stay longer’

‘bigger house, be put first’

‘for the foster child to understand what we are saying’

‘to prevent disabilities’

‘that all kids would have great parents like mine’

‘wish my foster brother the best future, because he is autistic and life will be hard for him’

‘not to foster’

‘big enough house that we all have our own room’

‘not all the attention to be on the foster children’

‘that the foster child was fully functional’

‘that the foster children that we have today never leave us’

‘that no child would ever be abused’

‘to be healthy and for there to be no sickness in the home’

‘that the boys would let me sleep in’

**Recommendations**

FCQ believes that natural children need to be informed right from the entry point of fostering through to exiting the system

**Training**

* *That Pre-Service Quality Care training is expanded to include a session particularly for natural children to attend. There would need to be two levels, one for 4 -10 year olds and one for 10 and over. Information session should provide a realistic and interactive forum for children to explore what fostering would look like for them, how it would change their family and could provide practical advise on how to deal with behaviours, sharing family and what to expect when a child comes into their home and then leaves their home.*
* *It is suggested that CREATE may take part in this and that in particular the above 10 year old group is given the opportunity to ask questions of Young Consultants about their experiences in care and how natural children can impact on this.*
* *That more focus is placed in the Pre Service Quality Care training on ways in which foster parents can assist their natural children through the different stages of fostering.*

***Assessment***

* *That a specific interview tool is developed which assessors use when interviewing natural children. This should seek to explore their understanding of the fostering system and potential impact on them and should reflect outcomes that are explored in the above proposed training. However any tool provided should be prescriptive in nature and should seek views only rather than having an assumption that children and young people will have a realistic idea of fostering.*

***Support***

* *That Fostering and Kinship Care support agencies, bring their mind to fostering families rather than just focusing on foster parents. Support packages should be wrapped around a foster family and learning and support plans should reflect the needs of each individual family member and then the family as a whole. Examples such as EAS should be offered to natural children if they have experienced a significant loss through a child leaving the home after a significant attachment being formed or if they have witnessed significant behaviours and are struggling with how to deal with these.*
* *Child Safety also must bring their mind to the notion of foster families, rather than just foster parents. Whilst is it understood that CSO’s will place the needs of foster children as a priority, as this is their job, there must be consideration for the needs of natural children and foster parents should not be put into situations where they are having to consistently prioritise the needs of foster children ahead of their own.*
* *A post module developed that is provided to natural children a year into caring that seeks to review with children their experiences and review topics discussed in initial training session. Now that the children have experience and real life situations that they can apply to fostering, these sessions will provide more meaning and understanding.*

***Exit***

* *All natural children 8 and above are provided with opportunity to participate in an Exit interview – this could just be an extra page added to current Exit Interview undertaken by FCQ which children have the option of filling out.*

Bryan Smith, Executive Director

On behalf of Melinda Ensbey, Social Work Student and

Carissa Inglis, Team leader and Student Supervisor