

# Foster fathers: their experiences and contributions to fostering

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## ABSTRACT

The paper reports some of the findings of an exploratory study that looks at foster fathers' experiences of fostering and discusses their routes into foster care and their perspectives on their roles and tasks. The study collected quantitative and qualitative data by approaching all foster fathers registered with a single independent fostering agency based in south-east England. They were asked about their personal and professional attributes, and their experiences of and views concerning the role of a foster father. The study discusses the foster fathers' motivation to foster, and argues that what they see as the benefits and drawbacks of fostering, and how it fits into their own family lives, are all relevant to improving service recruitment, delivery and retention. The study produced some evidence about the distinctive and positive contribution that foster fathers see themselves making to the lives of the children they foster. Further research is needed to refine our knowledge of what this contribution may be. Such knowledge could potentially develop our understanding of the roles of fathers in child development more generally as well as fine-tuning practice in matching what particular placements have to offer to the needs of individual children.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper reports some of the findings of a study that looked at foster fathers' experiences of fostering.<sup>1</sup> The study was prompted by a recognition of the potentially important role that foster fathers play in the lives of foster children, and by concern about the relative lack of attention paid to foster fathers by agencies, social workers and researchers. Although limited in scope, we hope that this study will provide a first step in clarifying the motivations, roles and tasks of these largely unstudied and silent participants in foster care, so that their contribution to foster care can be better understood and the benefits exploited.

Two relatively recent articles (Gilligan 2000; Newstone 2000) have highlighted the paucity of research that addresses the role of foster fathers; and a number of researchers and policy-makers have stressed the

importance of the foster father's role without being able to draw on much research evidence to support or clarify these claims (e.g. Fanshel & Shin 1978; Inch 1999; Triseliotis *et al.* 2000). Many major studies of fostering, including that undertaken by one of the present authors (Sinclair *et al.* 2004), have shown not a little gender blindness when appraising foster care services. For example, the latter study acknowledges that foster fathers are largely invisible, and comments:

... as will be apparent from the above, we have slipped from talking about foster families to talking about the 'main carer' (in practice almost always a woman.) While this book deals with family issues, it reports them through the eyes of female carers. (Sinclair *et al.* 2004, p. 23)

In contrast, however, Hojer – in a study that examined the impact of fostering upon the dynamics of host families in Sweden – suggests that foster fathers

have featured more prominently in recent years. In the qualitative part of her study, she interviewed both foster fathers and foster mothers and found that, as well as taking an active part in the everyday work of fostering, men were just as interested and committed as their partners when it came to talking about their contributions (Hojer 2004, p. 45).

The above discussion suggests an ambitious agenda, which we can only start to address in the exploratory study presented here. In this paper, we begin by drawing on the findings of the study to describe some of the key characteristics of the foster fathers in the sample, and discuss their routes into foster care and their perspectives on their roles and tasks. In a subsequent paper, we report on their training experiences, in particular in relation to that on safer caring – the guidance and practice for foster carers looking after children who may have been abused, first developed as a systematic focus of training about a decade ago by Fostering Network.

## THE STUDY

The study collected quantitative and qualitative data by approaching all foster fathers registered with a single independent fostering agency based in south-east England. The agency, which was established in 1990, has over 200 children and young people in family placements. Children are predominantly of school age, with about half being adolescents, and there is a mix of short-term and permanent placements. Many of the young people placed present challenging behaviours. The agency was chosen in part because it was known to have a particular interest in encouraging and supporting the involvement of foster fathers, a focus that we hoped would increase the response rate to our questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire, which was distributed via the agency newsletter, asked about the personal and professional attributes of respondents, and their experiences of and views concerning the role of a foster father. The drawbacks of taking the sample from what was likely to be a rather specialized group are recognized; however, given that the purpose of the study was to develop areas for further exploration, and in the light of other time and funding constraints that made a definitive study not feasible, this strategy seemed acceptable. Moreover, we found that in many respects the profiles of respondents were similar to those found in other, larger studies. These similarities, which are noted where relevant, give us reason to

believe that our sample can offer useful insights into the roles and responsibilities of male foster carers.

## METHODOLOGY

A postal questionnaire was sent, in early autumn 2004, to every foster father registered with the fostering agency. Respondents were also asked at the end of the questionnaire if they would be willing to be interviewed. Thirty initially indicated a willingness to be contacted for interview. Nine of these were, in the event, available during the 2 days of the planned interview, which took place at two of the fostering agency's offices.

Of the 118 foster fathers who were sent a copy of the questionnaire, 69 returned a completed form. This gives a response rate of 58%, which is lower than that in other surveys of foster carers (e.g. Triseliotis *et al.* 2000; Hojer 2004; Sinclair *et al.* 2004). This may arguably be a reflection of the extent to which some (but, as we shall see, by no means all) foster fathers regard fostering as primarily an undertaking of their female partner, or at least that the main responsibility for negotiations with the external world around fostering lies with the foster mother. In the Triseliotis *et al.* study, for example, which achieved a 74% return rate, 53% were completed jointly by female and male carers, and the remainder predominantly by females. From the information available to us, characteristics of respondents and non-respondents in our study seemed broadly similar (e.g. in experience of fostering, marital status and ethnicity). However, we have no way of knowing whether the non-responders' answers to crucial questions about fostering roles and tasks undertaken would have resembled those who did reply.

## PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

In general, the large-scale studies already discussed have suggested that foster families are rather more 'conventional' than others in the general population. They are more likely, for example, than comparable families to have two parents, one of whom goes out to work. In keeping with this, the majority (90%) of foster fathers in this study were married, the remainder (10%) were all cohabiting with female partners, and there were no single male carers. Relationships tended to be of lengthy duration, averaging 20 years together (and thus showing greater stability than couples in the general population). Most respondents were in their middle years, with an age profile similar

to that reported by Gray & Parr (1957), Bebbington & Miles (1990), Triseliotis *et al.* (2000) and Sinclair *et al.* (2004), who found, as we did, that most were aged 31–60 years, with the male carers being slightly older than females. Respondents were predominantly experienced carers, having previously fostered a mean average of 9.8 children – a figure that rose to 12.6 children when foster carers awaiting their first placement were excluded from the calculation.

It was perhaps unsurprising that, in comparison with average families, foster families had more children. At the time the survey was undertaken, the median average number of children per household (foster children and other children) was 3. However, one-third of households (34%) had four or more children. This may be a relevant factor in whether or not male foster carers take an active role in parenting; it is arguable that, with adults outnumbered by children, men in foster families simply do not have the option of just 'sitting on the sidelines'. Although she does not make an explicit link to the number of children in a fostering household, Hojer (2004) asserts that fostering 'draws males to the centre of family life' (p. 42).

All of the foster fathers described themselves as heterosexual. The self-reported incidence of disability among this group of foster carers was low: just 3% of male foster carers (two individuals) and 1% of their female partners (one individual). The proportion of both male and female carers describing themselves as coming from a minority ethnic group was also low. The vast majority of male foster carers (90%) described their ethnicity as being white English or white British, and others described themselves as white European (6%) or as of a specific European background (e.g. Dutch or Irish). None described themselves as black or Asian. Their partners were similarly mostly described as white English or white British (90%). These figures are broadly similar to those found by other studies undertaken in areas where the ethnic population is low (e.g. Sellick & Connolly 2002; Sinclair *et al.* 2004) and suggest that difficulties may arise if a child from a minority ethnic group needs to be fostered. However, ethnicity was not a key concern of this study.

## FOSTER FATHERS' EXPERIENCES

We now turn to consider three particular aspects of the foster fathers' experiences, namely recruitment and routes into fostering, employment and the related issue of finance, and finally foster fathers'

roles and tasks. We focus on these because they have been identified in the literature as key themes and because they are relevant to increasing our understanding of foster fathers' contribution to fostering more generally.

### Becoming involved: recruitment

Concern about the supply of foster carers inevitably puts a focus on the recruitment of foster carers; a growing body of literature has highlighted the effectiveness or otherwise of a variety of recruitment systems (Hill 1999; Triseliotis *et al.* 2000; Wilson *et al.* 2004). Judging from the literature, however, rather less attention seems to have been paid to the part men may play in recruitment. Yet evidence from our study suggests that, although rarely initiating the idea of fostering, many men took an active part in the process of deciding to foster. Therefore, it seems plausible that their willingness or otherwise to be involved is a significant factor in the ultimate decision.

Survey respondents were asked how they had first come to consider the possibility of becoming a foster carer. All were able to recall where the idea of fostering had come from. In almost half of the cases (48%) it was the man's partner who had first suggested fostering; in a further third of cases (36%) it was a joint idea; and in a minority of cases (7%) the idea had been initiated by the foster father himself. A full breakdown of replies to this question is shown in Table 1. Interestingly, these proportions are broadly similar to those in Triseliotis *et al.* (2000), a finding that suggests that the initial motivation to foster may be unconnected to later decisions about which fostering agency to apply to.

Our interviewees further illuminate some of the processes involved in embarking on becoming foster carers. In a number of the cases, either one or both

**Table 1** Whose idea was it to start fostering?

	Percentage*
Man's idea	7
Female partner's idea	36
Joint idea	48
Suggested by other foster carers	10
Cannot remember	0
Other	4

\*Total percentage is more than 100 as some respondents gave more than one response.

of the partners had had some previous familiarity with fostering, either dating from childhood or from friends' and relations' own involvement. Interestingly, in this (although very small) group, it tended to be the men rather than their wives who had had previous contact:

'We'd talked about it for years, and I mean years, before we had our first two boys. And my parents used to foster, so it came from that, and my wife was a single child . . . and we wanted more children around.'

'I was brought up in a family where my parents fostered, so that was one thing, although it wasn't a particularly good experience for me, that was . . . that happened, so that was part of my childhood.'

The interviews also convey the fact that although one or the other partner may have had the original idea or experience of fostering, taking the idea forward became a shared process:

'I think initially, the initial drive sort of came from me, inasmuch as "yeah, this is something that I want to do", and Mary, my wife, . . . she is a very caring person, as well, and so I think in one sense, we thought, "yeah, we can do this", you know.'

'My wife, Glenda, she was the one that sort of shoe-horned us into it, really. Although at THE TIME I WAS a registered child-minder, so it was sort of a natural progression, if you like. So it came at a time when my career was all upside-down anyway, so it sort of seemed to fit the bill.'

As other studies have done, our research too demonstrated the variety of motives that brought carers into fostering. These commonly included the conviction that they had something worthwhile to offer, in particular an experience of family life that could be of value to a deprived child: 'we felt we had a happy home which we could put to help children who hadn't had one'. For some, as with the carer above, who thought it would provide companionship for their daughter, or another carer who saw it as a means of preventing his youngest becoming spoiled by too much attention, fostering seemed to offer a fit with their own family's needs. For others, too, as in one of the examples given, the idea came along at a time when they were considering, or were obliged to consider, a career change (an issue we return to later).

Significantly, for a number of respondents, the feeling of 'something to offer' crystallized around the idea that, as men, their contribution could have a particular value:

'And I just felt that it would be great, almost to bring your work home with you, and actually do something to support kids – especially boys, who I think struggle with finding

positive male role models. They need, you know, good, solid figures in their lives, who can actually inform their lives, and help them to make more sensible choices in life, really.'

'I just thought, as a man, you could offer a safe and secure home to that child, as a new role model, which may help them change what they know, or what they think, about men.'

Some particularly valued being singled out during the recruitment phase as having something important to offer:

'Again, it was nice that, being a guy coming from a very sort of female-orientated area, meeting another guy who was very, very pro. You know, "we need more guys here". We almost signed up on the spot, really, with them.'

They seemed more centred round me, because I was a male, and I was interested . . .'

'Steve [social work trainer] was very much about, "you know, it needs to be a partnership more, you know, so we need more guys involved". And that was what swung it for me, really, here. Because it was more pitched towards, you know, "we want guys here, we want guys working".'

In contrast, one foster father commented on the 'gender blindness' of the trainer on his induction programme:

'The female social worker did the training, and she said, "now I'm going to pass you over to a very hunky policeman who's going to tell you all about the police procedure", and I was like, "excuse me! I don't find him hunky at all!" "Well, you're a man!" [laughs] and that has kind of stuck in my head, the way she didn't get that hint – you did get some saying, "well, obviously, child care is very female – as long as you look after the missus, and take them on holiday, and do all that sort of stuff, then it'll be great".'

Fortunately, as he added, another – male – trainer had balanced this negative perception later:

'It was all about, you know, "you need to get involved, even you guys who go to work, you'll be involved". That's what I liked.'

### Staying involved: employment and income

Other studies have highlighted the significance of the relationship between fostering and employment and finance in encouraging carers to enter and remain as foster carers (Kirton *et al.* 2004). Sinclair *et al.* (2004) suggest that turnover in fact is quite low (about 10% a year were reported in their study as leaving the service) and that a number of those leaving do so for reasons that may have more to do with inevitable 'life stages', such as retirement, than those that are amenable to influence. Nonetheless, they also argue that

the relationship of fostering to work outside the home, how fostering fits in with carers' other employment and its financial rewards are important issues in delivering a successful service. With this in mind, we wanted to explore the impact of fostering on men's employment and their perceptions of its financial rewards.

### Employment

The amount of paid employment (excluding the work of fostering itself) varied both among foster fathers and between the male survey respondents and their female partners. The majority (72%) of male foster carers worked full-time, with a small number working part-time (16%) and a few (12%) describing themselves as full-time foster carers. In contrast, almost half of the men's female partners (48%) were described as full-time foster carers, with 38% of women working part-time and only 13% in full-time employment. This gender gap was even more marked when comparing those who worked long hours (over 40 hours per week). Almost two-fifths (39%) of foster fathers worked over 40 hours each week, with 13% working over 50 hours per week, but only one woman worked more than 40 hours per week. Full details are shown in Table 2.

However, there were exceptions to the traditional family model, the most notable being those men (12%) who described themselves as full-time foster carers. Of these eight families, four were couples who both fostered full-time; in two cases the female partner worked part-time and in two cases the female partner worked full-time. In those cases where the female partner was in full-time employment, both men stated that their hours of work had not changed since starting to foster, implying that they had been 'house husbands' before becoming foster fathers.

**Table 2** Hours per week of paid employment

	Foster fathers (%)	Female partners (%)
None (i.e. full-time foster carer)	12	48
1-10	3	13
11-20	4	16
21-30	9	9
31-40	33	13
41-50	26	0
50+	13	1

With respect to the other six men who now fostered full-time, three had retired, one had sold a care business and two had given up paid employment in order to foster.

The experience of fostering also played a part in changing the work patterns of some men. Although the majority of respondents (57%) said that the type or amount of paid work that they did had not changed since becoming a foster carer, over four in 10 either had reduced their hours or had moved to become full-time carers. This came about, for some, because the satisfaction of fostering gradually drew them to participating more fully in caring for the children.

'So I gradually found myself doing more with the kids, and then it made sense to cut down on my job outside, and that's what I've done.'

'Well, I was full time, and I wasn't happy with not being there, and not going . . . you know, I didn't like all this "can I speak to your wife?", "is your wife there?", because you're almost never there. So I said, "right, I'm going to go part time". Which is what I did, and I only do 24 hours a week, so I'm there six, seven hours through the day, and get quite involved with whatever's going on, really, which is what we wanted to do.'

Where this had happened, the move had been made possible at least in part by the fostering allowances, which were seen by all nine interviewees as 'fair' – 'very good' – 'very generous actually'.

### Income

The household incomes of survey respondents (excluding any allowances received for fostering) tended to be lower than average, particularly considering that this research was undertaken in south-east England, where typical incomes are higher than in other parts of the country. The majority (53%) of respondents had annual household incomes of £25 000 or less; one-third (33%) had annual household incomes of £20 000 or less; and 14% of respondents had an annual family income of less than £15 000. The range of family incomes is shown in Table 3.

However, when allowances paid for fostering are taken into account, family incomes increased significantly. The agency paid a flat rate of £335 per foster child, per week. Where carers had three foster children placed with them, this is equivalent to £1005 per week – or £52 260 per year – of largely untaxed income; for two or one foster child the figures are £34 840 per year and £17 420 per year, respectively. However, it should also be noted that foster carers

receive no payment if they do not have a child placed with them. Income from fostering may therefore fluctuate considerably over time, especially if placements are short term. Respondents to the questionnaire were not asked how satisfied they were with remuneration for fostering, but comments from interviewees suggest that the income from fostering is one of the factors in their readiness to continue fostering. Moreover, the majority of interviewees agreed that the allowances enabled them to live quite comfortably.

'I didn't know, when I went into fostering, that you got paid for it, as a proper, paid job. I thought you just got fifty quid a week clothing allowance – that's what my sister used to get, because she did it for the local authority. But I can live with two . . . I can earn a living with two children, or more, quite comfortably.'

'And to be honest, you know, it provides us with quite a nice standard of living, without having to go to a normal job.'

**Table 3** Annual household income (excluding fostering allowances)

	Percentage
Did not say	6
Under £15 000	14
£15 000–20 000	19
£21 000–25 000	20
£26 000–30 000	14
£31 000–40 000	10
£41 000–50 000	9
Over £50 000	7

'It has allowed me to ease up my work hours so I have much more quality time with our foster children. It has been quite life challenging, and although we probably live on less money it has allowed me to get to know my own children and those fostered better.'

**Staying involved: roles and tasks**

Finally, we consider the contribution that foster fathers see themselves as making to the lives of their foster children, and to their family life more generally. There are two main issues to be considered here: first, what part fathers play in caring for their foster children, and second, whether or not there is anything that men contribute by virtue of their gender. Is there, for example, some quality that arises from being men, which another, female, adult could not contribute? In what follows, of course, it is important to remember that these are male perceptions of their roles and tasks and might not reflect their partners' views.

*The tasks associated with fostering*

Survey respondents were asked to rate whether they or their female partner took greater responsibility for a wide range of tasks associated with fostering. [The tasks, 52 in all, were largely derived from those used in other foster care studies, including a set of 12 questions developed by Marjorie Smith and used by Sinclair and colleagues to measure a quality of carers' child orientation. See Sinclair *et al.* (2005, pp. 188–190) for fuller discussion.] The results divide the tasks

**Table 4** Liaising with organizations and individuals outside the home

	A mostly male task (%)	Task shared equally (%)	A mostly female task (%)	Didn't say/task not relevant (%)
Contact with fostering agency	6	30	61	3
Contact with social services	6	26	65	3
Contact with schools	12	29	55	4
Contact with general practitioner and other health professionals	4	22	71	3
Contact with child's biological family	6	49	30	14
Contact with police and/or courts	22	25	19	35
Attend foster carer annual reviews	4	72	17	6
Attend child care reviews	3	61	30	6
Attend foster care training events	6	59	28	7
Attend fostering support group	7	41	39	13
Attend fostering agency social events	1	84	9	6
Attend school parents' evenings	7	46	35	12
Attend other school events	4	41	38	17

**Table 5** Household chores

	A mostly male task (%)	Task shared equally (%)	A mostly female task (%)	Did not say/task not relevant (%)
<i>Cooking</i>	9	20	66	4
<i>Laundry and ironing</i>	4	19	74	3
<i>Supermarket shopping</i>	14	33	49	3
<i>Clothes shopping for children</i>	3	20	72	4
Household cleaning	7	42	42	9
Gardening	42	35	20	3
<b>DIY and decorating</b>	<b>78</b>	12	6	4

DIY, do-it-yourself.

**Table 6** Directly child-related tasks

	A mostly male task (%)	Task shared equally (%)	A mostly female task (%)	Did not say/task not relevant (%)
<i>Bathing younger children</i>	1	28	54	14
<i>Teaching self-care skills (e.g. dressing)</i>	1	35	51	10
<i>Nursing a poorly child</i>	1	41	49	9
<i>Taking time off work to nurse a poorly child</i>	0	16	51	33
<i>Arranging to have a child's friends over to play</i>	4	20	65	10
<i>Arranging parties/other special celebrations</i>	3	25	65	7
<i>Handing out pocket money</i>	9	38	48	6
<i>Visiting a library</i>	1	30	43	25
<i>Talking about sex and relationships – with girls</i>	3	33	48	16
Reading bedtime stories	6	48	26	17
Comforting an upset child	1	68	23	4
Helping with homework	10	61	22	7
Helping to maintain child's friendships	1	52	36	10
Driving child to and from activities	23	59	10	7
Praising/rewarding child for good behaviour	0	87	9	4
Talking through any behaviour problems	7	78	12	3
Imposing discipline or sanctions	10	75	12	3
Negotiating boundaries (e.g. how late a teenager can stay out)	6	81	4	9
Talking about sex and relationships – with boys	19	38	17	25
Talking to child about his/her fears or worries	4	71	22	3
Talking to child about his/her biological family	4	65	23	7
Attending a place of worship (e.g. church, mosque)	4	36	13	46
Going to the local park	14	54	13	19
Playing games (e.g. snakes and ladders)	4	64	17	14
Playing sports (e.g. swimming, football)	25	49	7	19
Going to cinema/theatre/pantomime	3	71	14	12
Educational days out (e.g. museum)	1	64	16	19
Fun days out (e.g. theme park)	3	80	9	9
Taking child on holiday	0	84	3	13
<b>Watching sports (e.g. football match)</b>	<b>41</b>	33	6	20

into three broad categories (Tables 4–6). The first category, with 13 tasks, includes liaising with organizations or individuals outside the home; the second category involves seven tasks that could be broadly labelled as household chores; and the final category lists 32 tasks directly connected to meeting the needs of foster children.

Tasks for which the majority of foster fathers said they took main responsibility are shown in **bold**, and those where female partners bore the biggest burden are *italicized*. Tasks where there was no overall majority are left in ordinary type.

Female partners took as much as or more responsibility for most of these tasks than men. The only

exception to this was 'contact with police and/or courts', where men were marginally more likely to take the main responsibility in this area. More broadly, it was noticeable that tasks relating to general 'contact' with officialdom tended, on average, to be the preserve of female partners, whereas tasks that involved 'attending' specific events were more often shared equally. This may suggest that in many homes female partners take responsibility for dealing with day-to-day issues (e.g. contact with a child's social worker, or appointments with the child's general practitioner), and that foster fathers involve themselves to a greater extent in pre-planned events (e.g. foster care reviews, or school parents' evenings).

In relation to household chores, there was clear evidence of a 'traditional' gendered division of labour. Men were more likely to take the lead role in relation to gardening and do-it-yourself (DIY), but in all other respects women were taking the lead in everyday household chores.

There is some further evidence for the gendered division of labour within the tasks relating to direct involvement with children. However, what is arguably of greater note is that the majority of these tasks (20 out of 31) were judged to be shared about equally between male respondents and their partners. Notably, those parenting tasks that promote attachment, either by providing security and comfort, by developing autonomy or by modifying behaviour (Heard & Lake 1997), seem to be carried out more or less equally by male and female foster carers. As these tasks are likely to be highly relevant to successful fostering outcomes, the fact that the men in our study perceived these tasks to be as much their responsibility as their partners' provides support for the centrality of their role in the fostering relationship.

Our interviewees (perhaps predictably as they were a self-selected group likely to be highly committed to fostering) largely reflected the picture of joint involvement and shared responsibility:

'But I guess if we were to write it all down, which we've never done, because we never do that, but I guess it's very evenly balanced.'

'I think we probably are fairly equal, actually. Because I guess I probably spend as much time – although I do go through phases when I'm not at home, for work. But I generally sort bedtimes out, and I always wake them up in the mornings, because I'm always the first one up.'

Only one interviewee felt that he took a clearly secondary role, seeing this, however, as a reflection of the dynamics of their relationship more generally than specifically related to fostering:

'Yeah, I think just because of the way that we are, Doreen takes the lead role in the majority of things, so I think that just was a natural. But not only with the fostering, I think with most things, Doreen is in the forefront of it, I think.'

All gave examples of activities that they undertook, sometimes with their partners, sometimes on their own, with the foster children. Many of these fell into a stereotypically male category:

'I tend to do more activities with the children, although we do do quite a lot as a whole family. This morning I was taking the 16-year-old boy out to buy a keep-fit workbench which he'd wanted. I like taking them all fishing, the boys, all have gone fishing, to see if they like it or not, and different sports events.'

But the activities were mostly seen not just as an opportunity for having fun, important though this was – *sometimes we just lark around* – but as a chance to develop confidence, build relationships and so on:

'Take them for walks, hold their hands. They'd never had this, and it was very, very strange for them. And it was a very positive thing to do, for them and for us, at the time. . . .'

'A good example, the other day, is that my car has a water leak, or did have a water leak. They're easy to fix and find, but Ricky . . . wanted to know how you fix water leaks in the car. So he came out, and I showed him. And again, that's the teacher in me, I guess. I quite enjoyed doing that, because he was a willing participant, and he wanted to do it. And I just enjoy having conversations with him at night, just sitting and watching telly.'

Most interviewees felt that as couples they had adopted their roles relatively unconsciously – *we didn't really ever discuss it*. However, some described approaching their division of labour more deliberately, actively attempting to counteract stereotypes:

'If there's an element of sexism creeping into any of the children, we switch roles. Katie will do the car, and I'll wash up. I'll cook – I cook anyway, and again, the boys enjoy cooking. . . . a good example is that one day Katie stripped down the computer and put in a new bit. "What are you doing? Stewart does that". "I can do this as well". "Does he know?" [laughs] "He's there, look, he's watching me!" [laughs] "Oh, is he checking up?" And we did mix it up a lot – we'd have a rota, actually, for household chores. And cooking is a chore! If I cook, that's a chore, so you wash up, K cooks, I Hoover, stuff like that.'

Finally, all of the men interviewed considered that as foster fathers they had a specifically male contribution to make. One described the flexibility that having different genders provided:

'Some girls will prefer to come and talk to a male about problems. We had a 14-year-old teenage girl that couldn't get

on with her stepdad. And she used to come and talk to me, and ask why there was such a difference between him and myself, but wouldn't talk to the wife about it. So yeah, it depends on the child.'

Some felt that there were issues to do with male behaviour that only a man could effectively deal with:

'I'm trying to teach him that you can't do that, ever, at all. But he hasn't grasped it yet! And I think that's a positive thing, because it's all right for a woman to say, "you mustn't hit women", or "you mustn't hit anybody, but you especially don't hit women", but they would say that, wouldn't they? In his eyes, he'd think, "well, you're just saying that because you're a woman". It needs a man to say that.'

Yet others, as we described earlier in the paper, felt it important to provide a benign, counter-picture of what fathers were like:

'I think they can offer them the same things, but they [the children] might think that women are generally OK, and men are generally not OK. So if they are looked after by a man, or at least partly looked after by a man, who is OK, then if there's one man in the world who's OK, then there must be more. So they can't all be bad. If that's a child who's had bad experiences with men.'

'We felt that it was best for me to actually go and sit and play with the children, and show them that not all males were . . . could do them harm. Sit there and read to them, and cuddle them – because they'd never been cuddled by anybody apart from a female'

Interestingly, even the interviewee who said firmly that he did not consider any distinction should or could be made between male and female parenting went on to give an example of a boy who had indeed gravitated towards him.

## DISCUSSION

The study does, we think, provide evidence to support, although tentatively, the views of those who assert the importance and distinctiveness of the foster father's role. First, it is clear from our study that men do indeed play a part, often an active one, in the decision to foster. Getting more of an understanding of what prompts foster fathers to foster, who they are and how they perceive and manage the role may be a means of tapping into an additional pool of foster carers. So foster fathers' motivation to foster, what they see as its positives and drawbacks and how it fits into their own family lives are all relevant to improving service recruitment, delivery and retention. In addition to ensuring awareness of the impact of training materials, styles and so on, it might be sensible to do more actively and specifically to recruit men. There

was some suggestion that the positive identification and encouragement given to men in the first stages of recruitment was a significant factor in the couple's decision to become foster carers, and that it helped to meet male recruiters and trainers (Newstone 2005).

Second, the fostering allowances (together with the current tax arrangements) were in general seen as satisfactory, so that the relationship with employment, and managing fostering in relation to outside work, generally seemed to work well. How much this contributed to the sense communicated in questionnaires and interviews of relative contentment with the role is unclear, but it is reasonable to assume it helped. For our sample at least, the critical relationship between fostering, employment and adequate remuneration seemed to be satisfactory.

Finally, the study produced some evidence about the kind of contribution that foster fathers see themselves making to the lives of the children they foster. This provided insight into foster fathers' perceptions of the roles that they fulfilled, both with foster children in particular and within the household more generally. Broadly speaking, it appeared that foster fathers tended to take the lead in relation to only a small number of what might be termed traditional masculine roles – such as DIY and watching sports. In comparison, there were a greater number of roles that were predominantly undertaken by female foster carers – including contact with schools, social services and the fostering agency; cooking, shopping and laundry; and bath time, teaching self-care skills and nursing poorly children. However, the majority of tasks were judged to be shared equally between male and female foster carers. This was true of many activities that might, in previous generations, have been regarded as part of the 'mothering' role, and included tasks such as household cleaning; attending school parents' evenings; reading bedtime stories; comforting an upset child; helping with homework; and talking to children about any problems, fears or worries they might have.

It was evident that many foster fathers were actively trying to support their foster children in a gender-neutral manner and, by doing so, to act as a positive male role model. Foster fathers were, for the most part, eager to embrace both the practical and emotional aspects of foster caring: they were aware that many foster children have a history of difficult relationships with men (birth fathers, mothers' partners) and believed it to be important that they taught *by their actions*, that men were capable of relating well to both children and to their wives or partners.

In thinking about how we can develop services to become more attuned to addressing the diverse range of foster children's needs, we need to refine our ideas about the role of foster fathers. We do not in fact know whether it is, as some of the literature on 'ordinary' fathers suggests, the presence of two committed adults who can provide parenting that is crucial, rather than gender differences *per se* (Lamb 2004). It may be that foster care in fact requires a more conscious kind of parenting, one where gender does play a part. For example, with children who are likely to have been abused, does the presence of a benign male offer an important alternative model, which less needy children do not require? As we have seen, many of the fathers in our study see this as the case.

Fathers, at least as they conceived their roles, participated in a majority of the tasks involving direct work with children more actively than might have been predicted. Our interviewees considered that, as men, they had a distinctive and positive contribution to make in helping troubled children resolve their difficulties. Further research is needed to refine our knowledge of what this contribution may be. Such knowledge could potentially develop our understanding of the roles of fathers in child development more generally as well as fine-tuning practice in matching what particular placements have to offer to the needs of individual children.

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## NOTE

- 1 All names and some identifying details from respondents have been changed.