

Therapeutic Fostering Model



Mica Douglas
Head of Therapeutic Services at **By the Bridge**

“If there is anything
that we wish to
change in the child
we should first
examine it and see
whether it is not
something that
could better be
changed in
ourselves”

Carl Gustav Jung

Therapeutic Fostering with By the Bridge

By the Bridge leads the field in providing therapeutic fostering to children and young people. We have been judged **OUTSTANDING** in every category by industry inspectors, **OFSTED**.

We are an independent fostering organisation, currently based in Kent, Essex, West London, Norfolk, the Midlands, Yorkshire and North West. Founded by Foster Parents, we have a real heritage and understanding of this specialist and professional work.

What makes the difference for a child or young person

We look after children and young people who cannot live with their own families for all kinds of reasons. Many of those children have lived through extraordinary experiences that children should never be exposed to. The child's trust in adults has usually been shattered and it often takes time and a great deal of patience to understand how they view the world.

Foster Parents receive training to help them work out the very best kind of parenting a child needs. For example if a child has been harmed or witnessed domestic violence, a Foster Parent will need to know how that will affect a child's behaviour and how to manage that behaviour.

If a child has been neglected the Foster Parents may need to understand the impact of that on issues such as: eating, attachment and wanting to control the world.

Our belief is that the relationship between the Foster Parent and child has the potential to be a therapeutic intervention. The safe, caring home that is provided may be the first time that a child has felt contained and been able to relax. Good parenting skills are a great starting point but people who foster with By the Bridge also need the ability to build on those skills to parent children who have been traumatised and do not attach easily to people looking after them.

Nothing is more powerful for the child than to know that another person can stay with them in the midst of their turmoil – if someone else can sit alongside them, can help them manage big feelings and uprooted from their birth family - the child learns that they too can bear what at first was unbearable.

By the Bridge's Therapeutic Model

By the Bridge has developed its own model of fostering based on 15 years of experience of working with children and young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

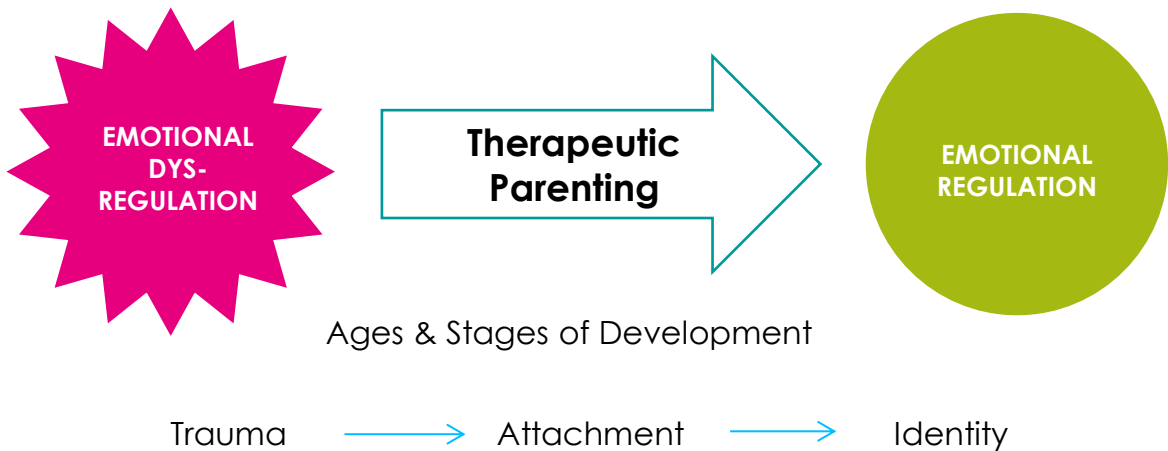
We see the family environment as having great potential for creating a continually available therapeutic healing resource for the child.

The major difference between an ordinary family and the extraordinary work done by Foster Parents at By the Bridge is in how the foster family thinks about the child.

Employing qualities of empathy and mindfulness can make the difference between a Foster Parent reacting to a child and really thinking through what might lay behind the behaviour being displayed. For example stealing food could be perceived as:

- A child being greedy
- A child being hungry and not daring to ask
- A child used to being starved as a child for food
- Being dared by other children to do something naughty
- A child who is used to not knowing where the next meal will come from
- A child who is symbolically saying that they need more nurture

A Foster Parent who can think through all these different options and reflect on which best fits for the child, given their history and relationships within the family, will respond from a considered place and not a reactive place.



Therapeutic Model explained

The different elements of the model are explained below:

Trauma

The model is based on the principle that every child that is placed with By the Bridge is traumatised in some way; either through being uprooted from their family or through their past experiences.

Foster Parents will need to know how to live with a traumatised child, how to be with a traumatised child and how to help them through things such as night terrors and triggers that may cause flashbacks.

Foster Parents are not taught to be therapists they just need to be willing to receive training on how they can do their best by a child in those circumstances.

Until the child or young person can process trauma safely, they will not be able to attach to the Foster Parents because they will be busy internally keeping themselves safe .

An awareness of what is going on for the child in their internal world is a crucial skill in therapeutic fostering.

Attachment

When a child feels safe enough in a family they will begin to attach to that family and the task then for the foster family is to help the child develop healthy relationships. A number of training courses help Foster Parents to understand attachment and child development so that the Foster Parent has a range of strategies for building attachment and an understanding of what might be going on for the child.

Therapeutic Model explained (cont...)

Identity

Once a child or young person has found ways of dealing with trauma and begun to attach to a family, they then have the internal space to connect with who they are and make sense of their own world.

Ages and Stages

Sometimes children and young people coming into care will be much younger emotionally than their actual age. This is usually because of their past experiences causing a child to miss out on some normal ages and stages of development.

Foster Parents can assess the emotional age of the foster child and then act accordingly. Sometimes this might mean that a 10-year-old needs to be tucked up in bed and read a story that would be suitable for a five-year-old. It might mean that your fostered teenager loves playing with your younger children because it helps them to have a different experience of that age and stage of development.

Dysregulation

As babies children learn to soothe themselves by internalising good, nurturing experiences through all of their senses. When children have had abusive or neglectful experiences

as babies and young children they do not learn how to soothe themselves and cannot regulate their own emotions. Feelings become very frightening experiences and cause distress to the child who cannot make sense of them. When this happens children are said to be “dysregulated”.

Through their experiences at By the Bridge, with Foster Parents, who can help a child make sense of big or confusing feelings and help them put words to those feelings,, a child or young person can learn to “regulate” themselves.

Our expectation is that most children coming into By the Bridge will be dys-regulated initially and it may take time and focused attention for them to begin to learn how to calm themselves down internally and manage their feelings without being scared of them.

Therapeutic Support

Training

By the Bridge works with children and young people who may have behavioural and emotional difficulties and, as a result, Foster Parents are offered regular training up to degree level in order to equip them with the skills they need to achieve success.

In addition to specialist training, By the Bridge offers Foster Parents 24-hour access to a Link worker, monthly group supervision, monthly individual supervision, dedicated out of hours support and access to a psychotherapist regularly.

Individual Therapeutic Plans

By the Bridge also initiates a therapeutic plan for each child placed with them. The plan is a working document that outlines any issues for the Looked After Child in terms of behaviour, emotions, relationships, self-esteem, transitions, birth family, education and therapy.

In conjunction with the Foster Parent and Local Authority Social Worker, By the Bridge helps to identify the care needs of each child. They offer Foster Parents strategies and ideas for helping the child develop in the areas identified as needing attention. The plan is reviewed every three months and adjusted if necessary.

Participation

Young people are consulted over their plan and can contribute to the process. A therapeutic plan has been developed that can be filled in by the child or young person themselves.

Continuous Improvement

Success rates, based on the length of time a child is in placement, are 53% nationally for all kinds of Looked After Children (based on findings of the Social Work Research and Policy Unit, University of York). At By the Bridge they are **98.1%**.

We know that we are meeting the needs of many children and young people through statistics like these, but we continue to integrate new developments derived from the latest research to improve this success rate even further.

Colin's case study

Colin was a young person with severe attachment difficulties who had not been to school for two years when he came to By the Bridge. His Foster Parent worked really hard with him and gradually he was reintroduced to the school environment, but it was always a struggle.

School regularly struggled to contain Colin's behaviour. As he reached puberty and began to grow, teachers would become more defensive and less creative in the ways they dealt with him.

One day his Foster Parent was called to school in an emergency to take Colin home. She arrived there to find four members of staff restraining Colin, each holding a limb and forcing him to sit on a chair. The teachers were yelling at the Foster Parent to be careful because he "will kick out".

The Foster Parent stayed calm, began talking to Colin in a soothing voice, reassured him that he was safe and asked staff to let go of him. She moved to hold him and he struggled a little with her but then fell into the bear hug she offered.

She very calmly told him that they were going to walk out of school to the car and go home. They walked across the playground with staff calling after her:

"Are you sure you are going to be OK, he is dangerous".

She knew that he had got scared by something at school and had then lashed out, which escalated the incident.

Her and school are working together to find ways to be more containing and soothing of Colin's feelings. So that he can stay thinking and not get into his highly sensitised fight/flight response developed as a neglected and sexually abused baby.

What helped this Foster Parent stay calm and not be scared of this rather large 12-year-old having a two-year-old tantrum, is the knowledge she has learned from training about how the brain works, how to help a child or young person to regulate their emotions, and looking beyond the behaviour to what it may be communicating.

Elements of our Therapeutic Fostering

Therapeutic is the golden thread that runs through all of By the Bridge's work and is embedded within our organisation. Many other fostering providers may offer different models of therapeutic fostering, but they tend to be either: short bursts of training for Foster Parents; therapy only when there is a problem or a reward based system that does not work with children with attachment difficulties.

By the Bridge's Therapeutic Support Model



What do we need from Foster Parents?

By the Bridge specialises in providing a therapeutic environment for foster children. We recruit people from all walks of life who have the potential to provide the kind of care that is needed.

Qualities needed in a Therapeutic Foster Parent

- Acceptance that the child you are working with is traumatised
- Accepting the child for where they are in their development and emotional health
- A willingness to look beyond the difficult behaviour, when it occurs, to what may be causing that behaviour
- Compassion, empathy and respect
- Willingness to learn and to ask for help when you need it
- A commitment to supervision and training
- Professional approach to working as part of a team around the child