

Preparing for the years ahead

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners

Purpose:

This module supports practitioners to work alongside carers during periods of reflection and forward planning. It positions reflection as a trauma-informed, relational process that strengthens placement sustainability, carer confidence, and shared responsibility. Rather than treating reflection as a task or requirement, this module frames it as a supported conversation that helps carers make sense of their experience, name what has helped, and identify what support will be needed as care continues.

Reflection with Carers

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Reflective processes can activate threat responses where there is a history of power imbalance, scrutiny, or perceived evaluation. Trauma-informed practice recognises that reflection depends on relational safety, choice, and pacing, as capacity for integration and perspective-taking reduces when carers feel unsafe or judged. When grounded in lived experience rather than performance or compliance, reflection supports learning, confidence, and sustainable care. Reflective practice is inherently bidirectional, requiring practitioners to attend to how power, system pressure, and their own responses shape relational safety and effective support.

Practitioner Guidance:

- Frame reflection as optional, paced, and non-evaluative, and name that discomfort can be a normal nervous system response.
- Interpret avoidance, minimising, or emotional withdrawal as safety responses rather than resistance, and prioritise co-regulation before reflection.
- Anchor reflection in concrete lived experience, strengths, and observed change rather than abstract evaluation.
- Be explicit about roles, limits, and system constraints, and actively acknowledge power dynamics to support relational safety.

Reflection Questions:

- How has my language, pacing, and responses shaped whether reflection felt safe or exposing for carers in this stage of the work?
- Where have system pressures or urgency influenced how I supported carers to reflect, and how might I approach this differently moving forward?
- What adjustments in my practice or approach would strengthen trust, partnership, and sustainability in my work with carers over the coming year?

Relevant Statement of Standards:

Standards a-k



Preparing for the years ahead

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners



Reflecting on the past year

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Looking back over the past year can activate vulnerability for carers, particularly where caregiving has involved sustained stress, uncertainty, or perceived scrutiny. Trauma-informed theory recognises that carers may default to problem-focused narratives, minimising progress or effort, as threat responses narrow attention toward what feels unresolved or unsafe. Reflection that centres stability, adaptation, and repair supports nervous system regulation and strengthens caregiver identity. Reflection becomes a protective process rather than a self-judging one.

Practitioner Guidance:

Anchor reflection in stability, adaptation, and relational change rather than outcomes alone, as carers may minimise progress under sustained stress. Expect difficulty identifying positives and actively name strengths or shifts carers may overlook. Slow the conversation when emotion rises, prioritising regulation before reflection and meaning-making.

Reflection Questions:

- “If you were describing this year to a new carer, what would you say has been important?”
- “What would you want others to understand about what this year has required of you?”
- “What has helped you keep showing up, even when it’s been hard?”

What you know now

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Through ongoing caregiving, carers develop embodied knowledge based on proximity, emotional attunement, and observation of patterns in a child’s regulation and behaviour. This experiential knowledge is critical to understanding a child’s needs in context and often emerges before formal professional interpretation. Trauma-informed practice recognises carers’ insights as essential information that supports shared decision-making and sustainable care.

Practitioner Guidance:

Recognise and reflect carers’ developing expertise in the child. Supporting carers to name what they now understand helps consolidate learning and strengthen caregiver confidence, particularly where stress or system pressure has undermined trust in their judgement. Translating carers’ observations into shared language reinforces partnership and validates growth as a natural outcome of care.

Reflection Questions:

- What do you usually do first when something starts to feel off for the child?
- What has helped you get through challenging moments in the past?
- What helps you feel more confident in your decisions on a day-to-day basis?

Preparing for the years ahead

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners



Growing children, changing needs

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Children's development is non-linear, and growth often brings new expressions of distress, attachment needs, identity questions, and regulatory challenges. Trauma-informed theory recognises that developmental transitions can reactivate earlier stress responses, increasing vulnerability for both children and carers. Anticipatory reflection supports proactive, less intrusive intervention by shifting practice from crisis response to relational planning. When change is framed as developmental rather than problematic, carers are more able to engage with future-focused support without fear or defensiveness.

Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to view change through a developmental and relational lens, normalising shifts in behaviour and emotional needs as part of growth rather than failure. Use paced, curiosity-led conversations to anticipate transitions without creating urgency or fear. Framing change as expected supports regulation, reduces self-blame, and strengthens collaborative planning.

Reflection Questions:

- What changes in behaviour or emotion have you noticed recently?
- What seems to help the child cope when things feel overwhelming?
- What makes daily life easier for your household at the moment?
- What kinds of situations feel most demanding for you right now?

Growing understanding through learning

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Trauma-informed practice recognises that learning framed as remediation or correction can activate shame and disengagement, particularly where carers have experienced scrutiny or system harm. When learning is positioned as curiosity-driven and strength-based, it supports confidence, reflective capacity, and sustainability of care. Offering choice and acknowledging informal learning alongside formal training reduces threat and increases engagement.

Practitioner Guidance:

Invite carers to reflect on learning needs as part of growth rather than deficiency, and explicitly validate experiential learning alongside formal opportunities. Match learning options to carers' capacity, context, and preferences to avoid overwhelm or withdrawal. Reframe uncertainty or reluctance as information about safety, timing, or support needs rather than resistance.

Reflection Questions:

- What information or understanding has been most useful to you so far?
- How do you usually prefer to learn or take in new ideas when caring feels demanding?
- What would make learning feel more manageable or relevant right now?

Preparing for the years ahead

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners



Considering the whole family

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Caregiving occurs within a family system, and the wellbeing of all household members directly affects placement stability and child safety. Trauma-informed theory recognises that stress can be carried quietly by family members, particularly biological children, through behavioural change, withdrawal, or increased responsibility-taking. Attending to the whole family reduces cumulative strain and supports sustainability of care over time. When family impact is named and supported early, it reduces the risk of burnout, resentment, and unspoken stress escalating.

Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to reflect on family impact in a way that does not position other children as barriers or risks. Use curiosity-led, non-blaming language to notice how care affects the household and to identify where additional support or adjustment may help. Framing family reflection as protective rather than evaluative supports openness and reduces defensiveness.

Reflection Questions:

- What parts of family life tend to absorb the most pressure during busy or stressful times?
- When the household feels unsettled, what usually helps things settle again?
- What has helped your family adapt to change in the past?

Support that sustains care

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

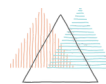
Sustainable care is strongly influenced by the quality, accessibility, and responsiveness of support systems. Trauma-informed practice recognises that carers are more likely to seek help and raise concerns when support relationships feel predictable, respectful, and relational rather than supervisory. Inconsistent or misaligned support can increase stress, withdrawal, or reluctance to engage, even where need is high. Reviewing support at this stage helps identify protective factors, gaps, and relational strain before they impact care stability.

Practitioner Guidance:

Approach conversations about support as a shared review rather than an evaluation of carer capacity. Use transparent, partnership-focused language to explore what has been helpful, what has felt misaligned, and what may need to change as circumstances evolve. Explicitly invite feedback about agency support and respond with curiosity rather than defence to strengthen relational safety.

Reflection Questions:

- What gets in the way of asking for support at times?
- If support were working well, what would feel different day to day?
- What helps you feel safe enough to be honest about what's not working?



Preparing for the years ahead

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners

Specialist Resources & Further Reading:

- Bath, H. (2008). The three pillars of trauma-informed care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 17(3), 17–21.
- Beresford, P. (2013). *Beyond the usual suspects: Toward inclusive user involvement in social services*. London: Shaping Our Lives.
- McPherson, L., et al. (2014). Supporting placement stability in out-of-home care. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(10), 1621–1633.
- Perry, B. D. (2006). Applying neurodevelopmental principles to child welfare practice. In N. Boyd Webb (Ed.), *Working with traumatized youth in child welfare*.
- Ruch, G. (2007). Reflective practice in contemporary child-care social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37(4), 659–676.
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- SNAICC. (2021). *Family-led and community-connected practice resources*.
- Harvard Center on the Developing Child. *Reflective supervision, serve-and-return and regulation frameworks*.

Self-Care Reminder for Practitioners

This stage offers a chance to pause and reflect on your own practice — what has supported you this year, and what has felt stretching or heavy. Taking stock now can help you prepare for the year ahead with greater clarity and care. Attending to your own support and wellbeing strengthens your capacity to stay present and relational with carers and families.




Remember:

- Reflection is most helpful when it feels safe, paced, and free from judgement.
- Carers' lived experience is a strength and deserves to be recognised and valued.
- Support works best when it feels like partnership, not oversight.
- Caring for your own capacity helps you support carers and families over time.
- Don't forget to celebrate the wins!

Support Options:

- Internal reflective supervision
- Peer consultation groups
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

 “We don't have to do it all alone. We were never meant to.”
— Brené Browne.