

PART 3 : Fostering Through a Community of Families – what transferable skills you can bring to fostering?

Kirsty Ayakwah (0: 00) Hello and welcome to the Social Work Community Podcast, where we speak directly to social workers about the topics and issues impacting them and shaping the profession.

My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, Senior Commercial Editor at Community Care, and in this the third (0:18) and final episode in this three-part series with Hampshire County Council's team, we explore (0:24) Hampshire Hive, a network designed to support fostering families across the county.

This series is called 'Fostering Through a Community of Families', and over the last two episodes, we've heard from Hive manager Amy, who along with foster carers Andrea and Johnny have talked about how they got involved in Hampshire Hive.

We've explored some of the myths typically associated (0:48) with fostering and challenged them, and in this episode, the trio return with Amy speaking to (0:56) Johnny, who used to work in youth work, and Andrea, who was a mental health nurse, to find out what (1:03) life lessons and transferable skills they've been able to take from previous professions into (1:10) fostering. To date, the network helps 27 Hampshire Hive groups with 23 foster care support workers (1:18) and over 500 registered foster carers collectively.

Amy kicks off the conversation.

Amy (1:25) So, Johnny and Andrea, you've both worked in several caring professions, youth work and mental (1:33) health. What's led you to do that?

Johnny (1:36) That's an interesting question, because I've spent many years as a builder prior to coming into foster care or into youth work, but also my childhood (1:43) was quite a challenging time for me because I was brought up in care up until I was 11, 12 years old, (1:49) so that kind of carried with me.

So, I think it was always there in the background of my mind to (1:54) do something like this, and it took a life-changing event inside my personal family that then led me (2:01) down a different pathway, which led me into youth work. And like I say, youth work is an absolutely (2:06) brilliant model that I could use to inspire and work with young people, because it was very much (2:12) about going out outreach. We were engaging with disengaged children or young people that weren't (2:18) engaging in services.

There was that risk of knife crime, there was a risk of teenage pregnancy, (2:23) there was a risk of engaging in antisocial behaviour. So, we were engaging in them and trying to just (2:29) make a redirection in their life, and that's where the foster care come to me actually (2:34) working at a deeper level with these young people, where I'm not just there for two hours or four (2:39) hours a week and then in a different place working with another set of young people for two or four (2:44) hours, whatever. It's actually I'm there 24-7.

I'm that positive role model on a day-to-day basis, (2:51) and actually trying to make some of those changes and subvert some of the experiences that I've had, (2:57) and try and convert them into making into strengths. And that's where I see some of my (3:02) experiences I had

as a child, young person, that was very much disenfranchised. I left school with (3:08) no qualifications, I didn't engage in education, I couldn't read or write.

So, my childhood was (3:14) quite challenging, and I used some of those strengths that are actually, I see them as (3:19) strengths of how I've managed to use those and turn my life into what it is today. And I see, (3:25) like you say, as a foster carer, I see that as a really privileged situation that I can work with (3:29) these young people, and I've got that genuine in-depth knowledge of how it feels to be a disengaged (3:36) or disempowered young person.

Amy (3:40) Do you think then that that early life experience and how you've (3:42) been able to choose a really positive path in life, do you feel those experiences have enabled (3:48) you to connect with children to show that actually their potential is limitless?

Johnny (3:54) Absolutely, 100%.

(3:55) I think young people and children are very tuned into authentic people, they can see through it. (4:00) If somebody's disingenuous, they're very good at seeing that, you become very transparent. And it's (4:05) not something that happens in five minutes, you do need to be patient, you do need to be consistent, (4:10) you need to be resilient in yourself.

If you're going to give up at the first hurdle, then (4:14) game over, isn't it? So you do need to have an element of resilience, which does come from your (4:19) background. You know, I know how it felt all over every hurdle, and how much resilience that took (4:24) me to get back on that and keep trying, keep trying, keep trying. But with a positive role (4:30) model in their corner, I just think that resilience is added, it's helped, it gives that buffer, if (4:35) you like, for the times that they do fall over, they can bounce back, because actually someone (4:39) that's got that experience, you know, the skills that they've developed throughout their life, (4:44) and I don't believe you have to come from a hard life, hard background, I don't believe that at (4:49) all.

I just think that it's not something that should be a barrier to you going forward. Because (4:55) that was one of my big things, when I started to go through the process, they need to dig in, (5:00) they need to see how resilient, what are my motivations, they need to know all of that. (5:05) It was quite a cathartic, therapeutic relationship that formed, because I did need to speak about my (5:11) past, I needed to speak about the challenges that I've had to overcome to get to where I am today, (5:17) and how I've come to terms with those.

So, like I say, I'm not saying it gives me (5:22) more credentials, I'm not saying that at all, what I'm saying is, it shouldn't be a barrier. (5:27)

Amy (5:28) And the listeners won't see this, because obviously this is just audio, but Andrea, (5:31) you've been nodding away here, can you relate?

Andrea (5:36) Oh, without a doubt. I had quite a dysfunctional (5:37) family up until the age of 13, I had to move away, and I've got a really good understanding (5:43) of what it's like to actually be away from friends and the family disintegrating.

But I think, (5:50) coming back to role models, I was really fortunate that my mum found a really amazing man, (5:56) and that would be my stepdad, and he was phenomenal. You

know, he taught me how a man (6:03) should treat a young lady. He was ex-SAS, I like to say, and my behaviours were quite questionable, (6:11) I was quite naughty, refused to go to school, same as you, Johnny.

I'm sure many people have been the (6:17) same, you know, everyone pushes the boundaries, don't they? But you know, reflecting back, (6:23) I used to really dig my heels in, and I really wouldn't do as I was told at all, but when I (6:28) eventually got somebody that was actually quite kind and caring, I pushed him to his limit. (6:32) And bless his heart, he stuck with me, and it really, really resonated with me of what a difference (6:39) his presence in my life changed me. So lovely to hear.

And that's something, as you come into (6:46) adulthood, not only do you want to do that for your own children, but when you start seeing other (6:51) children that are a little bit wobbly and a little bit unsure about life or where they're going and (6:57) feel that they don't have any hope, I know I can dig down in my boots and go, well, actually, (7:03) when I came out of school, things weren't quite so good, but I did go back and I did retrain, (7:08) and here we are. And I think sometimes you just need somebody that believes in you, and I knew (7:14) that my stepdad saw me, and I think this is what Johnny's saying, you know, you know when someone's (7:20) being authentic, and he saw me, and he stuck by me, and I feel that that was something that I wanted (7:27) to give back. I also found that when I was bringing up my own boys in their teenage years, and I was (7:32) on my own, and then doing it the hard way of going through university and working, I found that (7:39) there was an awful lot of children gravitating towards my home and sitting on my sofa and (7:45) chatting away to me, you know.

And I think that's where I really sort of felt that somewhere along (7:52) in my distant future, I would really love to go into foster care. And that was put on the back (7:57) burner for a little while, being a mental health nurse, because that's what I was training for. (8:01) But again, it's funny how life merges into the same sort of areas again, because even when I (8:07) was working on a ladies acute ward, we would often see foster carers coming in with the babies, with (8:14) children, to see their mums.

And I was like, oh, how, you know, how do you get into this? And (8:20) trying to find out what they'd done, and how they found it, and asking a billion questions. And (8:26) I kind of always knew that that was probably my direction eventually.

Amy (8:30) Well, it came true, didn't it, Andrea? Because it's almost like it was meant to be.

Andrea (8:35) You know, I think the hardest thing at that time was, I didn't really know how to get into it. (8:39) That was my biggest hurdle. I really didn't know how to make that step.

So I don't know (8:44) how you found that, Johnny. How did you make that decision and that transition?

Johnny (8:49) It was while I was studying at uni, and there was a foster carer on the course. And she said to me, (8:54) oh my God, you would be amazing, because I was doing youth work, a degree based on youth and (8:59) community work, so engaging in communities and stuff.

And she said, oh, you would be, you know, (9:04) oh my gosh, you'd be really, really good. You've got that natural ability of connecting with young (9:08) people and connecting with people. And that's what led me in.

And so then it led to making a call, (9:15) finding the courage to make the call, and then finding the courage to have the initial assessment. (9:19) Because rejection is a big part of what I'd experienced as a child. So I feared rejection.

(9:26) I feared being rejected. But then I thought, no, if I really want to do this, I need to overcome (9:31) that fear. I need to expose myself to the potential rejection and put myself forward, (9:37) which is what I've done.

And, you know, I've never looked back since. So, yeah, that's what, (9:41) that was my pathway in, because I've never had anyone in my family that fostered or whatever. (9:46) So I had no clue about fostering.

It was only this one person on that course who said, look, (9:52) go for it.

Amy They sowed the seed, Johnny, didn't they? They sowed the seed.

Johnny Yes. (9:57) I think it's also, listen to what people are saying to you as well. When people turn around and say, (10:02) you'd be really good at that, they don't say it for no reason. They see something in you.

And I (10:06) think sometimes you've got to trust people and how they view you and how they watch you with (10:11) children and how you interact. And I think if you've got those qualities, you're halfway there. (10:17) Not even just with children, is it? It's that caring profession.

So you could be a nurse, (10:22) you could be a carer, you could work in a hospital or in a community-based job. It's that (10:28) caring profession that I think people see potential.

Andrea (10:32) A hundred percent.

I think also you could be in a completely different profession as well. (10:37) I used to be a prison officer. I've done that.

You probably wouldn't see that as super caring, (10:45) if you like. But it's still caring, isn't it? It's still providing. (10:49) To be fair, I did end up getting a position which was to do with that.

But yeah, I mean, (10:54) if you looked at that role, you wouldn't necessarily always assume that that was (10:58) who you was and what's within you. (11:00) But also again, going back to making it brief, I was getting my hair done once and my hairdresser (11:05) was just chatting away, you know, talking about things that she'd done. And she was really arty (11:10) and how she sort of got her daughter involved in things.

Again, talking about COVID and all (11:15) the things that she'd done. And I said, do you know what? You'd make an awesome foster carer. (11:19) And she went, oh, please don't say that.

I've been thinking about it. And I was like, (11:24) you should do it. Go for it.

Just go for it.

Amy (11:26) And where is she now, Andrea?

Andrea (11:28) With Hampshire.

Amy (11:33) Amazing.

Andrea (11:34) Yeah, she's with Hampshire. Yeah. But I just knew, I just knew.

She went around putting (11:38) googly eyes on bananas. You know who you are. Yeah.

And I do think it's like people from (11:47) all walks of life, they don't dismiss it. You really just don't know what you've got in your (11:54) toolbox.

(Amy) So, Andrea and Johnny, what skills do you feel you've learnt within your other (12:01) professions before you came into fostering that you've been able to use in your fostering roles?

(Johnny) (12:08) Yeah. So, as a youth worker, the biggest tool that I'd use was effective communication. So, (12:14) learning how to communicate with people, and that can be the young people and also their (12:20) carers, parents or whatever, because actually everyone was involved in that process. When (12:25) you're dealing with a young person that's maybe having a bit of difficulty, we're trying to (12:28) engage them in education or we're trying to engage them in training, whatever, you do need (12:33) to be on board with parents.

And I think that was one of the skills, many skills, that really (12:39) supported me within foster care, as well as this empowerment role. Like I say, it was all about (12:45) empowering young people. How do we make a young person be captain of their own ship? And that, (12:52) again, comes down to this effective communication.

It was about being empathetic and actually seeing (12:58) it from their point of view and understanding that actually I may not like your situation, (13:03) but actually I can empathise with you and why you're in that situation. And so, that was one (13:08) of the skills that honed in as a youth worker, and it's largely group work as well. So, you would (13:13) be working with groups of young people with an element of resistance.

So, it's managing to break (13:19) down that and being resilient to break down that resistance. So, they may have been deliberately, (13:25) being young people as young people are, deliberately doing things to try and throw a curveball or (13:30) whatever, and it's actually knowing how I'll respond to that. I can pause, I can withstand (13:34) quite a lot of challenging behaviours which come from my youth work background, because actually (13:40) you would come across some situations that would test you.

They would test your resilience and how (13:45) you cope with that. And that's one of the skills, one of the many skills that are taken from youth work.

Amy (13:51). Amazing.

Leading on for that then, obviously that gave you a good start in terms of really good (13:57) skills that were transferable to Hampshire to foster. What about the support or

the training (14:03) that Hampshire offers? Has that enabled you to build on those skills or not?

Johnny (14:10) Absolutely, 100%. Because within training, you are very much encouraged to use your skills that you bring (14:17) to participate in it.

And that's one of the things I really enjoy about training. It's not just about (14:22) delivering this to you, it's about you getting out of it what you want out of it. And if you (14:27) don't put anything in, you won't get nothing out of it.

That is my philosophy. So, very much (14:31) the way that they encourage you to participate in a genuine way and use your skills as well as (14:38) pulling on the next person's skills and just seeing it all from them different angles. And (14:43) whether it be attachment theory, whether it be, you know, looking at some of the fundamental things (14:48) of fostering, how do we engage young people in education or how do we work with parents that (14:52) are quite resistant to working with you? All of those big, big questions that we deal with day (14:58) in, day out.

And it's great because that allows you to do that. You can use your skills in that (15:03) setting. So, people come from all different backgrounds with all different skill sets.

Amy (15:09) We all come from different places, don't we? Some people may have a degree, other people may (15:13) not have been in education. And that's the strength is that we see that we're inclusive, (15:18) recognise people's skills for what they are. We definitely value all our foster carers equally (15:24) and what they bring to fostering.

Andrea, you bring in a lot of skills and experience (15:29) to the fostering community and to your hive, I suppose, alongside lots of other people's (15:36) experience. How is that knowledge shared amongst you so you can learn and develop from each other?

Andrea (15:44) I think where you have the meet-ups, you're talking, you're listening, you're finding out (15:48) what other people's background is, experience. There's been some other foster carers, they have (15:54) way more experience than me.

They can give me advice. As much as I've got my experience, (16:01) there's always going to be something that you've not come up against or something you need to (16:05) figure out. And nine times out of 10, somebody in that hive can give you that.

Training-wise, (16:11) I think, brilliant. Again, it is inclusive. And also, what I want to say is that even when there (16:19) are some courses, you know, if you go up to level three, you're given the opportunity to do (16:23) a diploma.

And a lot of people, they haven't done any essay writing for years and years, (16:29) and they get 110% support from the training team. They're not expected to be like everybody else. (16:38) When one person's done an essay within, I don't know, two days, somebody else might take two (16:45) months.

And that's OK, because everybody goes at their own pace.

Amy (16:52) Hearing from Jonny and Andrea today, I think the key messages here are to not underestimate the personal and professional (16:58) experiences you have to become a potential foster carer for Hampshire. So for us, (17:05) please do enquire.

It may be that life-changing experience for you. Just do it.

Johnny (17:13) Absolutely, Amy. I couldn't agree more. Please, you can make a difference to a child's life. (17:19) Nothing more rewarding.

Kirsty (17:23) Thanks for listening to this podcast series with Hampshire County (17:24) Council's fostering team. This series is called Hampshire Hive, fostering through a community of (17:31) families. If you'd like to find out more about fostering with Hampshire County Council, (17:36) please visit [hants.gov.uk forward slash fostering](https://hants.gov.uk/forward-slash-fostering).

That's [hants.gov.uk/ fostering](https://hants.gov.uk/forward-slash-fostering) (17:47) to download their comprehensive information pack. You can also sign up for (17:53) one of their upcoming virtual Q&A sessions attended by both a member of their recruitment (17:58) team and a Hampshire County Council foster carer. Thanks for listening to this podcast.

(18:04) If you missed any of the episodes in this three-part series, visit Hampshire County (18:08) Council's employer profile at www.communitycare.co.uk to listen to the full series (18:17) and other content about the council. Bye for now.