



# Counselling skills make the difference

**South Essex Partnership Trust (SEPT) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), accredited counselling skills training for foster carers**

A successful training model has been developed which delivers results to foster carers and the children for whom they care.





## Background

The Service to Children Requiring Intensive Psychological Therapies (SCRIPT) is part of the South Essex Partnership Trust (SEPT) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). Members of the SCRIPT team identified a need for counselling skills training for foster carers. They devised and delivered the first nationally accredited counselling skills for foster carers course in Britain. The programme ran from September 2011 to February 2012 and was accredited by the National Open College Network (NOCN).

## Identified needs

The idea for the course was successfully pitched to a 'Meet the Dragons' event at a Skills for Care and Skills for Health conference in 2011. The need for the course was identified on a number of different levels:

- it was an opportunity to enhance the professional status of foster carers
- there was scope to enhance the component on counselling skills
- training foster carers in this way could help prevent mental health issues worsening and reduce placement breakdowns
- demographic research had shown that 90% of foster carers had not engaged in learning since leaving school
- carers cannot simply be expected to rely on 'normal' parenting skills when caring for children whose responses are complicated by a history of ill-treatment, neglect or challenging behaviour
- it would enable foster carers to be better equipped to support children in care on their path to recovery
- the fostering task is potentially easier when carers have good insight into children's emotional needs.

## What was done?

The original component of the mental health module was expanded into a 30 hour course, designed to meet NOCN requirements and run over five months, with a formal assessment at the end, see Appendix 1. The programme was completed by ten foster carers, all of whom achieved the level 2 Certificate of Merit. The course was run through a partnership with Luton Borough Council and the University of Bedfordshire. South Essex Partnership Trust is a registered learning centre for the NOCN.



## Outcomes

Twelve foster carers started the course and ten completed it. Feedback on the course was 100% positive. The evaluation report on the course noted that:

“the carers believed that their knowledge, understanding and skills in supporting the emotional and mental health needs of their foster children improved substantially at the end of the course.”

One foster carer emphasised how the course had empowered her to deal with the challenges she faces. She felt that she had shifted her style as a direct result of the training, with both listening and more focus on the use of open questions. The outcome was that the children feel better about themselves. She said that the course teaching was down to earth and made her feel comfortable. She noted that:

“I am better at getting to a solution with the children. A lot of what I use, I knew before, but I have sharpened up my skills, for example when I praise the children.”

Another foster carer said she found the course enjoyable and was able to get on with it, despite being worried about doing an examination at the end and finding this daunting. She noted that there had been changes in her practice in vital areas:

“I find that I talk differently now to the young people in my care and I use open rather than direct questions. It was about wording things differently. I tend to listen more. I realised how much listening I have to do.”

She now has a discussion with the young people and does not raise her voice any more. The atmosphere of the house has also changed for the better. She describes the course as being a big help all round and thinks it could be offered more widely, for example to parents as well.

## Next steps

It is not yet certain how the counselling skills course could be delivered in the future, but it provides a model for others to develop further.

## Contacts

<http://www.sept.nhs.uk/Mental-Health/Young-People-Services/Child-and-Adolescent-Mental-Health-Service.aspx>



## Appendix 1: Counselling skills for foster carers course aims and outcomes

### Overall aims of the introductory course

1. To enhance and improve the verbal communication skills of participants, especially the ability to listen, to respect silence and to communicate empathic understanding. Emphasis will be given to working in groups
2. To introduce trainees to experiential learning processes that will include a high element of personal growth work. Developing further self-confidence and self-esteem.
3. To enable foster carers to better manage emotional conversations with their foster children.

### At the end of the course, trainees should:

- have a basic understanding of what counselling is about and compare and contrast with other forms of helping such as advice or assessment
- acquire some basic skills to further improve their own communication processes
- discuss the inequality of the power relationship between the adult and the child and show an understanding of issues of difference.

### Further information

For further information about the health and social care integration work between Skills for Health and Skills for Care please contact:

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