

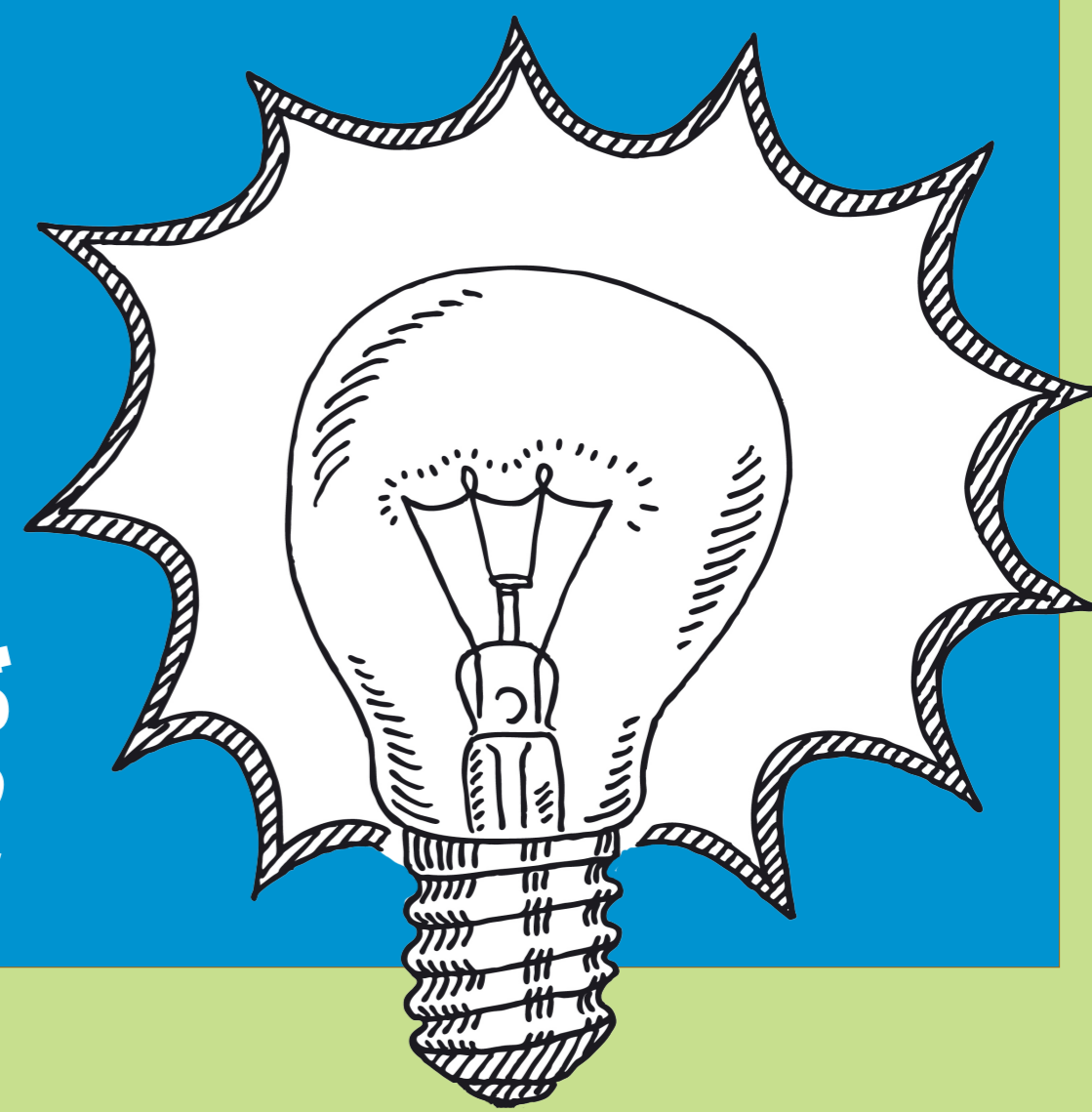
# Food for Thought: Food based training, assessment and intervention tools for carers of looked after children

## Authors/team:

Ruth Emond, Samantha Punch, Ian McIntosh, University of Stirling, Foster Care Associates (Scotland), Aberlour Child Care Trust, Perth and Kinross Council, Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS), Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS)

effectively use research to improve the situation for children or families or to address issues in personal relationships

9



centre for research on families and relationships

## What research was used? Why was it appropriate?

Food for Thought (FFT) was based on two ESRC projects involving sociologists, social work academics, foster carers, social workers, learning and development staff and senior social work managers. The first 30 month ethnographic study, 'Food Practices in an Institutional Context: Children, Care and Control' (FaCS) involved participant observation (3 months each in 3 units), focus groups and individual interviews with staff and young people in residential care.

Key findings from the original research project included:

- Food is used symbolically both within and across generations.
- Approaches to residential care are diverse but it is important that the structure and routines around food practices are enabling and aiding the well-being of all rather than being disempowering or constraining.
- Food practices can be shrouded in ambivalence and ambiguity: they may be intended in one way but interpreted by someone else in another.
- If practice is determined by risk prevention it can become too rigid to accommodate the children's needs. Staff and children need to be allowed flexibility and room to shape and negotiate their relationships and food practices.

The follow-up 18 month knowledge exchange project generated, delivered and sustained a range of resources based on FaCS's empirical data, relating to the symbolic use of food and food practices in residential care. The resources were also adapted for foster care, and were devised and piloted using a grassroots, participatory approach with three agency partners, all of which provide residential and/or foster care services to children in Scotland.

The ethnographic approach used in FaCS, coupled with the co-production of FFT practice resources allowed the topic of food to be considered beyond its normal focus. It viewed that practitioners respond best to knowledge that is not only accessible but applied (MacRae and Skinner, 2011). This process of application via partnership working and a 'bottom-up' approach to practice development (Buckley and Whelan, 2009) underpinned FFT.

## How did you get people interested in the research?

A range of activities engaged people for this interdisciplinary collaboration. The partnership ensured that key stakeholders were involved, able to take ownership and promote the research from the outset.

The partnership developed five resources for carers and practitioners, to take account of different learning styles, opportunities to undertake training and variable access to ongoing support:

- Online Interactive Introduction.
- Reflective Workshop Materials (Facilitators' Pack/Handouts).
- Reflective Tool and Guidance.
- JOTIT Notebook.
- Peer Support Guidance.

All FFT resources and publications are freely available: <http://www.foodforthoughtproject.info>

Practitioners, foster carers and managers from across the UK as well as internationally (Germany and Australia) attended one of four, free 'Train the Trainer' workshops. These aimed to increase confidence and train those looking to deliver FFT workshops in their organisations. Nine peer support sessions have been facilitated and six Reflective Workshops have been delivered, including two in Australia. We have requests to deliver workshops in Liverpool and Fife (2016).

Since the funding finished (November 2013), there continues to be growth in demand for the FFT team to facilitate workshops and peer support groups. We also have an increase in organisations delivering the Reflective Workshops themselves. This is an indicator of the resources becoming more embedded in the practice community and 'ownership' transferring from the FFT team to practice. At the request of two agencies (NHS Lothian and FCA) we brought together organisations using the FFT materials in March 2016 in order to consolidate and build on the work of FFT and to learn from each other.

Data from the project website indicates that the resources have been downloaded from across the world (in March 2015 over 4,000 views; 2605 downloads). The Staff Handbook and Children's Leaflet from FaCS have been translated into Finnish, and we have had requests to present FFT in Ireland, England, Germany and across Scotland.

## Who benefitted from the research?

'Food for Thought' (FFT) added to the knowledge base and skill set of residential and foster carers, as well as their managers and supervising social workers. These developments not only related to food practices, but extended to promote understanding of the ways in which adults and children communicate through symbolic means. The five resources (available online) targeted aspects of direct care and aimed to improve practice effectiveness as well as enhance the quality of life of looked after children and young people.

Many of those who have used the FFT resources identified areas of practice that they would do differently, including: reviewing how they manage mealtimes, greater flexibility around routines, thinking about what the child might be telling them through their use of food, considering how they might use food to let children know they care about them. Participants also take emerging issues to supervision or FFT peer support meetings.

## What did the team learn from the project?

The team also researched, and are writing academic papers on, the experience of partnership working, co-production and knowledge exchange. An independent researcher interviewed the academics, steering group members and key stakeholders (foster carers, residential staff and supervising social workers). This work shed light on factors which contribute to sustained partnerships and the embedding of research into policy and practice. Key findings included:

- Relationships are central to meaningful partnerships.
- Drawing in practice wisdom and experience is essential in designing resources that will appeal and be used in practice.
- Genuine co-production takes significant time and resource.

The findings and our learning from FFT highlighted the importance of good communication between partners and of holding regular face-to-face steering group meetings. This enables members to be supported to participate effectively and feel safe/valued to express their views.

Having partners involved from the preparing of the follow-on proposal (late 2011) until now (3 years beyond funding) has had a huge impact on embedding FFT into practice. This has been time consuming and sometimes challenging for all members to juggle competing demands but has resulted in a sense of team work and ownership of the resources and a desire to champion them.

Co-production and meaningful knowledge exchange is labour intensive and requires academics to respect and encourage the views of stakeholders even when these contradict or challenge their position. It is an immensely rewarding way of working to produce effective resources.

## How did you evaluate the impact?

The Food for Thought resources set out to both raise awareness of current food practices and to encourage practitioners to think about the ways in which food can be used therapeutically in their care of children. Food for Thought enables carers to view food beyond nutrition and to reframe challenging food behaviour to avoid seeing it only as a 'problem'. This shift in awareness allows workers to closely examine what children may be saying via their use of food and in turn enables them to tailor their responses to this underlying communication. It encourages staff and carers to be aware of the ways in which their own food practices and their expectations of children's food behaviour is also symbolic.

Feedback forms from Workshops and Peer Groups (approx. 170 foster carers/practitioners) overwhelmingly rank FFT highly or extremely relevant to their care of children.

The feedback from carers so far indicates that children in their care are experiencing a more nurturing, attuned response through food and food practices which will both aid recovery from past trauma as well as ensure that their day to day lived experience of care is appropriate, flexible and reflective. The ongoing evaluation of the project is now seeking wider feedback from children and young people rather than just the carers' perspectives.

Via email we know organisations continue to use FFT, eg:

- Perth and Kinross Council incorporated FFT into induction training for new foster carers.
- Scottish Residential Child Care Workers Association run FFT peer support groups.
- Berry Street (childcare organisation in Australia) use Reflective Workshops as part of mandatory induction training for all residential staff.
- NHS authority and Foster Care Associates run Reflective Workshops regularly.

Ongoing impact: via an ESRC-funded PhD studentship using FFT as a key case study.