

Whose job is this?

Team work in foster care

Real Kids, Real Carers

A continuing education resource for foster carers

Written by Paula Hayden and
Louise Mulrone



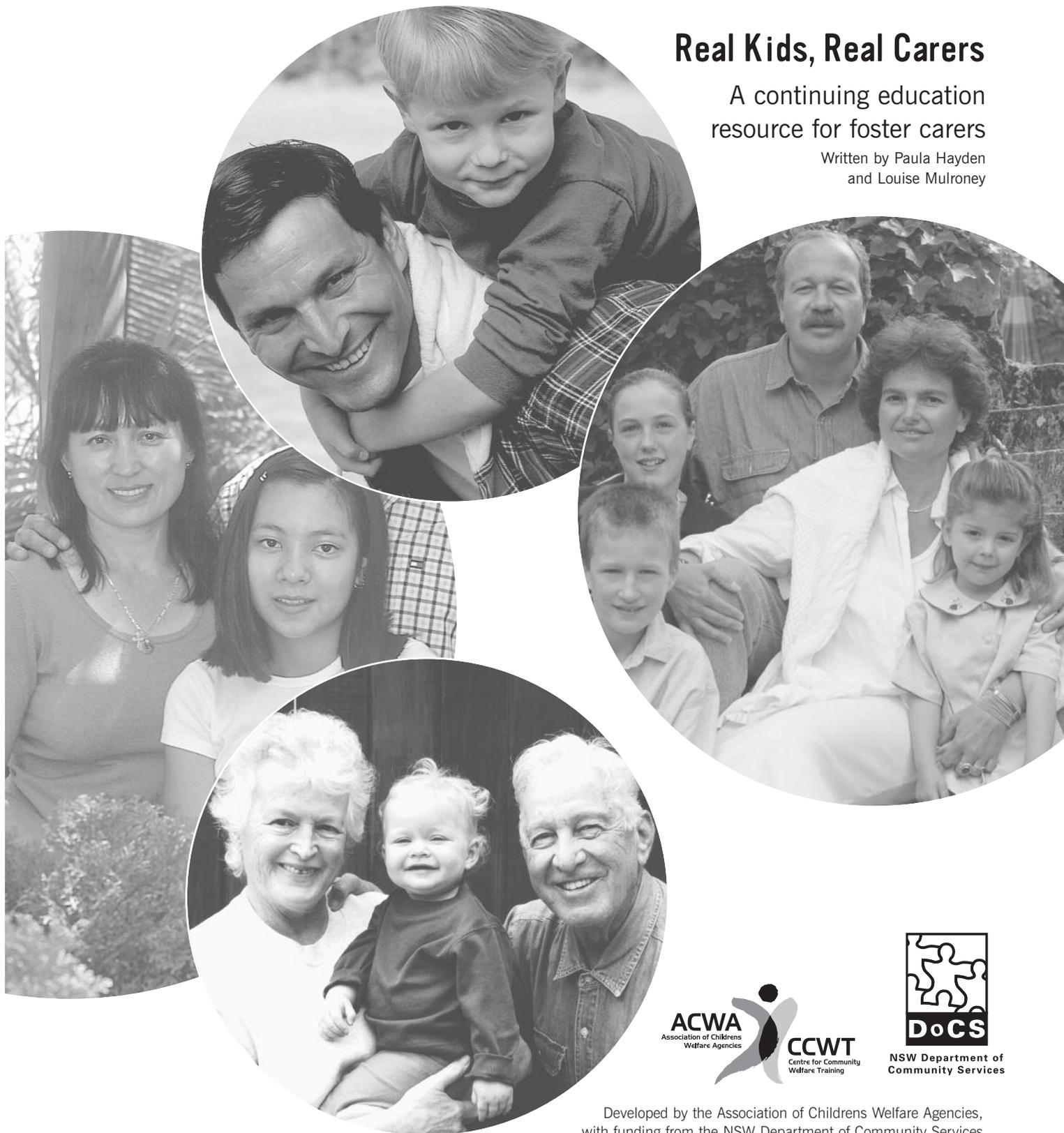
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Written by Paula Hayden
and Louise Mulroney



ACWA
Association of Childrens
Welfare Agencies



CCWT
Centre for Community
Welfare Training



**NSW Department of
Community Services**

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Additional copies

Additional copies of this booklet can be downloaded from
www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/

For more information contact:

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About Real Kids, Real Carers

This booklet is part of a continuing education resource for foster carers called *Real Kids, Real Carers*.

Real Kids, Real Carers contains 6 separate booklets covering topics of importance to foster carers.

The titles in the series

- ★ Independence and connections: caring for adolescents
- ★ I'm an individual: children and young people with disabilities
- ★ Participation: creating opportunities for children and young people to contribute to decision-making
- ★ Reality fostering: the impact of fostering on carers and their families
- ★ Whose job is this? team work in foster care
- ★ Whose problem is this? understanding and responding to challenging and difficult behaviour

Full copies of all titles in the series can be downloaded from www.acwa.asn.au/realkidsrealcarers/

Using these booklets

Each booklet sets out a two-hour education session. Experience has shown that foster carers are more able to access training that can be completed in a half day or evening.

The learning opportunities will be enhanced if sessions

- > involve an experienced foster carer as part of the training team
- > include agency workers as participants.

These sessions provide an introduction to the topic under discussion, though follow-up sessions may be required to explore the topic in depth.

These sessions are designed for all carers, whether very experienced or currently in their first placement. Children of foster carers, particularly those who are older teenagers and young adults, will also benefit from participating in these education sessions.

Training resources

These booklets provide detailed guides to all activities, including handout material to be photocopied for participants. Handout material can be found at the back of each booklet.



The booklets include “scripts” for trainers which are indicated by the use of the talking head icon.

Such scripts are not meant to be prescriptive, but provide input material that trainers can use and present in their own style.

Session information

Learning outcomes

At the end of the session, participants will be able to

- > describe the roles and responsibilities in the foster care team
- > identify a range of factors that assist in building good relationships between workers, carers and birth families
- > describe strategies to promote effective relationships between carers, workers and birth families.

Material required in session

- > Whiteboard
- > A workbook for each participant, made up of Handouts 1–6
- > Butchers paper
- > Roles and responsibilities cards (see templates after Handout 6)
- > Evaluation form for each participant (see the example at the end of this booklet)

Length of session

- > 2 hours minimum

Training should include opportunities for carers to informally exchange information and build their networks. Ideally training will include additional time allocated for a meal or coffee breaks.

Session Outline

1. Introduction (10 minutes)

Activity

Go around **group** and have each person say

- > his/her name (if group members don't already know each other)
- > one thing they hope to get out of this session.

Briefly introduce yourself

Explain any necessary housekeeping details eg location of toilets, length of session, need to turn off mobile phones, arrangements for refreshments etc.

Explain group rules

Highlight the importance of

- > maintaining confidentiality ie not discussing personal details about any child, young person or adult in a way that means that other people in the group could identify them. Acknowledge that carers will have a range of experiences of working with others, not all of which will be positive. This workshop will draw on those experiences, but remind group that it is the issues that should be focused on, not the individuals involved.
- > respecting other people in the group by listening to their opinions, even if not the same as your own.

Explain purpose of session

Distribute workbooks.

Go through Handout 1. Check with participants that the learning outcomes on the top of Handout 1 fit their expectations of the session.

2. Teamwork values (10 minutes)

Explaining the value of teamwork



“Outcomes for children and young people in care are likely to be enhanced when those adults involved in the provision of care are committed to working in a cooperative and respectful way.

Inevitably problems arise, which can put those relationships under enormous pressure and generate conflict. Conflict often arises out of crisis. It has been said that foster care is crisis driven, so we can expect conflict! The Chinese character for crisis and opportunity are the same. Crisis can provide opportunities for us to learn understand and improve ways of working.

Responding positively to crisis and building good working relationships with others may require us to learn a new ways of relating. Difficulties in relationships may need to be seen, not as roadblocks, but as gateways to learning.

In the process of seizing those opportunities every member of the foster care team needs to try to see things from other people’s perspectives, and to resist the temptation to stereotype.

The way we see the world, the values we bring to fostering and our own experiences of working in teams impacts on the way we relate to other people in the foster care team.”

Activity

Invite participants to complete **Handout 2** and retain for their own use.

Inform participants that they will not need to share their answers with the group.

Question to discuss

- ❖ How might our responses impact on the way relate to others in the foster care team?

For example if you believe that foster carers do all the real work in relation to caring for children and young people, how might this impact on your willingness to work as part of the foster care team?

3. Roles and responsibilities (10 minutes)

Highlight the importance of clearly defining roles within a team



“Clearly understanding roles and responsibilities within a team contributes to the building of trusting and co-operative relationships. When there is a lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, misunderstandings, resentment and conflict can arise. This can get in the way of the provision of quality care for children and young people.”

Activity

Divide group into three. Give each group a piece butchers paper with the following headings:

- > Group 1 - Carer
- > Group 2 - Birth parent
- > Group 3 - Worker

Provide each group with a complete set of cards

(photocopied from the two pages following Handout 6 in this booklet) which describe roles and responsibilities within the foster care team.

Ask each group to select cards which reflect the roles and responsibilities of the team member they have been assigned to consider (carer, birth parent or workers) and place those cards on their butchers paper.

Ask each group to read out the cards they choose.

Questions to discuss

- ❖ Did any groups choose the same card?
- ❖ If so, what might be the impact of this?

Ensure discussion includes the point that roles can easily become blurred.

- ❖ Did any group have significantly different numbers of cards than another?
- ❖ If so, what might this tell you about the people with that role within the foster care team are valued or understood?

4. Building blocks to better relationships (10 minutes)

Activity

Turn to Handout 3 “Building blocks for good relationships”.

Invite participants to fill in the blocks, with ways to contribute to the building of good quality relationships.

Ask participants for feedback and comments.

Some examples of responses may be: valuing peoples contributions, clarity around expectations, understanding roles and responsibilities, clear goals, evaluating progress, participation from all team members, valuing differences, identifying strengths, agreeing to disagree, good communication-feedback, trust, generating solutions together, dealing with conflict early and effectively, celebrating success.

5. What happens when things go wrong? (30 minutes)

Highlight the impact of power on people’s responses



“Crises, conflicts and disagreements are inevitable part of fostering. If conflict is not dealt with effectively it can generate resentment, anger and frustrations. This can make it difficult to focus on the needs of children and young people.

It can be tempting in a conflict to defend one’s position or to withdraw from the situation or to blame others. These reactions can be generated by a sense of powerlessness. This is the feeling that ‘nothing I can do or say will change the situation’.

Birth parents, workers and carers can all experience powerlessness to different intensities.

There is a danger of seeing power as an absolute, with one person having it to the exclusion of others. The reality is that all members of the foster care team have power. Perceptions of who has more or less power can change over time.

For example, birth parents have knowledge of their child’s history, personality and preferences. When these can be shared with and valued by others it is empowering for birth parents.

An individual’s sense of power is influenced by a range of variables including class, culture, gender and our previous experience of exercising power or of feeling powerless.

Perceptions about power and lack of power can strongly influence how people act.”

Activity

Read together Handout 4 “When things go wrong”. Ask participants to think about the power in this situation.

Questions to discuss

- ❖ From the perspective of the carer, who had the most power and who had the least? Why?
- ❖ From the perspective of the worker, who had the most power and who had the least? Why?
- ❖ From the perspective of the birth mother, who had the most power and who had the least? Why?

Power and conflict



“The perception of power can change as you see it from different people’s perspectives. The reality is that power and the exercise of power is complex. We can make assumptions about who has power and in the process underestimate our own power and influence.

Our perspective about power influences how we act. A carer who believes that workers have all the power will operate differently than another carer who does not believe this. For example, a carer who sees workers as all-powerful may not speak up when arrangements are being planned that are inconvenient.

Conflict emerges when people feel unheard, devalued and frustrated. In the aftermath of conflict people can become more entrenched and isolated in their position. However, conflict can be the opportunity to try and understand the needs and concerns of others involved and to work towards mutually satisfying solutions.”

Activity

Ask participants to look at Handout 5 “The conflict map”.

Ask pairs to fill out the conflict map, based on the case study in Handout 4.

Take the group through each step of the process as set out on Handout 5.

Ask each pair to share their final statement of the issue.

Questions to discuss

- ❖ Did your statement of the issue change as you looked at it from different perspectives?
- ❖ How helpful is an approach like this in generating solutions?

Importance of focusing on issues, not people, in a conflict



“Notice that the focus of this approach is on the issues, not the people involved. The approach that is ‘hard on problem – soft on the person’ is crucial in building good relationships.

This approach looks to discover what we share in common, as opposed to being focussed on what divides or separates us.

When people feel their needs and concerns have been taken seriously, they are more likely to feel valued, heard and appreciated. This empowers people to seek co-operative and collaborative solutions. People are more able to take responsibility for their own feelings and actions rather than blaming others.”

6. Communication strategies (20 minutes)

Importance of communication



“One key to building good relationships and dealing with conflict effectively is clarity in communication. Active listening, assertive communication and using ‘I’ statements can open up channels of communication and increase connection and generate empathy.

Communication is a two way process of listening and being heard. Active listening involves ‘tuning out’ of your own point of view and ‘tuning into’ the other person.

Assertive communication involves communicating clearly about the problem as it affects you without blaming or hurting the other person. Making ‘I’ statements rather than ‘you’ statements can assist this process eg ‘I feel annoyed when arrangements are changed unexpectedly’ rather than ‘You make my life so hard when you change arrangements unexpectedly.’”

Activity

Get participants to look again at Handout 4. Inform the group that Bronwen’s next statement is: “I’m sorry you heard my outburst, Sasha. I just get so frustrated with changes to the contact arrangements. Can we talk this through and try to find a way that suits us all?”

Write this response on the whiteboard.

Brainstorm how this response might influence the situation for the people involved.

Put the names of the people on the whiteboard (Leah, Sasha, Bronwen, Bob) and note down responses under these headings.

Divide participants into groups of 3. Ask them to imagine that they are the foster carer, Bronwen, who is wanting to raise her concerns about not being involved in decision making about contact arrangements. Ask each group to come up with some statements that Bronwen could make at the next case conference that are respectful, assertive and non-blaming.

Write on the board: respectful, assertive, assertive, non-blaming, remember the importance of “I” statements.

Feedback, with each group giving an example of a statement that Bronwen might make.

Taking the initiative in conflict solving



“There will be times in your fostering career when you will have to take risks in order to improve relationships with other members of the team. You may need to take the initiative to discover what you have in common as opposed to that which divides you. Risk taking is not easy, but is part of the task that all foster carers undertake.”

7. Dealing with difficult situations (15 minutes)

Coping with negative emotions



“A commitment to working things through by engaging in respectful relationships may not always work.

At the heart of the fostering endeavour is a complex web of human relationships. All of us are obliged to work with people who may be very different to ourselves, people in other circumstances we would not choose to have contact with, let alone work with!

Add to this the range of motivations, which drive different people in the foster care team and the sometimes-chaotic nature of the out-of-home care system. Little wonder conflicts arise which are difficult to resolve.

Decisions can be made which impact dramatically on carer’s lives, sometimes with little input from carers. This can generate a range of negative emotions. Carers have to deal with these feelings in a way that doesn’t negatively impact on the child in their care.”

Activity

Read through Handout 6.

Brainstorm ways that participants deal with negative emotions.

Caring for yourself



“To succeed in fostering for the long haul, it is essential carers take care of themselves. This will contribute to the building and maintenance of good working relationships. It is what helps carers continue to also focus on the needs and best interests of the children and young people in their care.

Children and young people do not need carers who never consider their own needs. They need adults who can recognise and meet their own needs and who can model constructive ways of dealing with challenges.”

8. Conclusion (10 minutes)

Activity

Ask participants to identify **one thing** they can do to build better relationships with the people they work with.

Invite participants to complete the evaluation sheet.

(See the example on the last page of this booklet.)

Learning Outcomes of Session

At the end of the session, participants will be able to

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- > describe strategies to promote effective relationships between carers, workers and birth families.

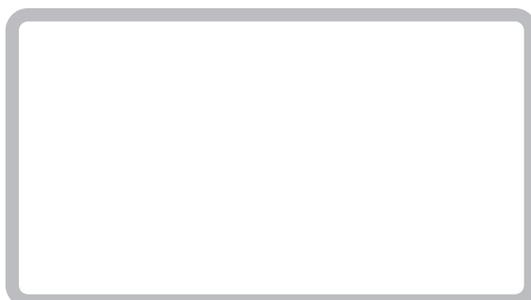
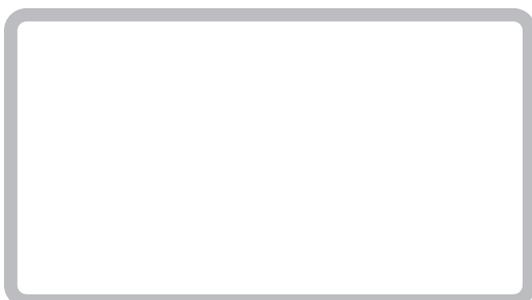
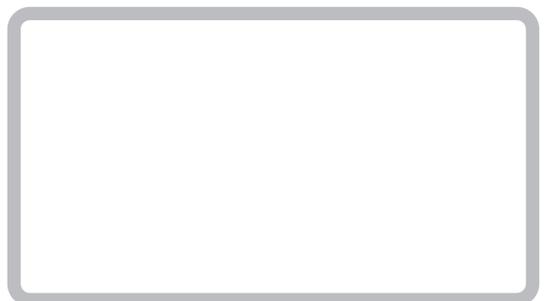
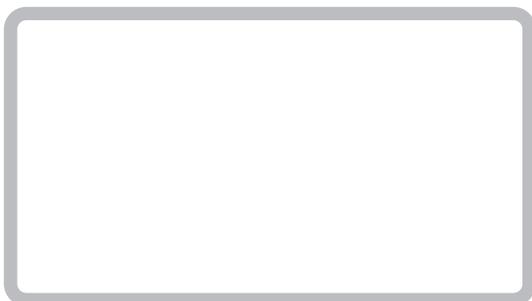
Session Outline

1. Introduction
2. Teamwork values
3. Roles and responsibilities
4. Building blocks to better relationship
5. What happens when things go wrong?
6. Communication strategies
7. Dealing with difficult situations
8. Conclusion

Values we bring to fostering

1. Birth parents make a positive contribution to children and young people in care.
 Agree Disagree
2. At the end of the day, it's carers who know what's best for kids.
 Agree Disagree
3. Carers, workers and birth parents need to work together to provide quality care.
 Agree Disagree
4. I do my job as a carer best when I'm allowed to do it on my own.
 Agree Disagree
5. Workers can be an important source of support for children and young people in care.
 Agree Disagree
6. A good way to deal with problems is to talk with your worker.
 Agree Disagree
7. We do all the work and workers have all the power.
 Agree Disagree
8. Good communication between everyone in the foster care team is vital to improve outcomes for children and young people in care.
 Agree Disagree

Building blocks to better relationships



When things go wrong

Leah, aged 4, has recently had contact with her mother Sasha. During the course of the contact Sasha requests that she be allowed to have contact on the Friday before Christmas so she can give Leah her Christmas presents. Bob, the caseworker, agrees.

Bronwen (foster carer) is advised by Bob about the change when she comes to collect Leah at the end of contact visit. Bronwen responds by saying, "We've planned a Christmas get together that day, I'm sick of being expected to fit in with what suits everyone else".

Sasha hears Bronwen's response and says, "What's wrong with you! You've got Leah all the time. I just want to see my little girl so I can give her presents, she's my child you know".

Meanwhile, Bob notices Leah sitting in the corner with her hands over her ears.

Questions to discuss

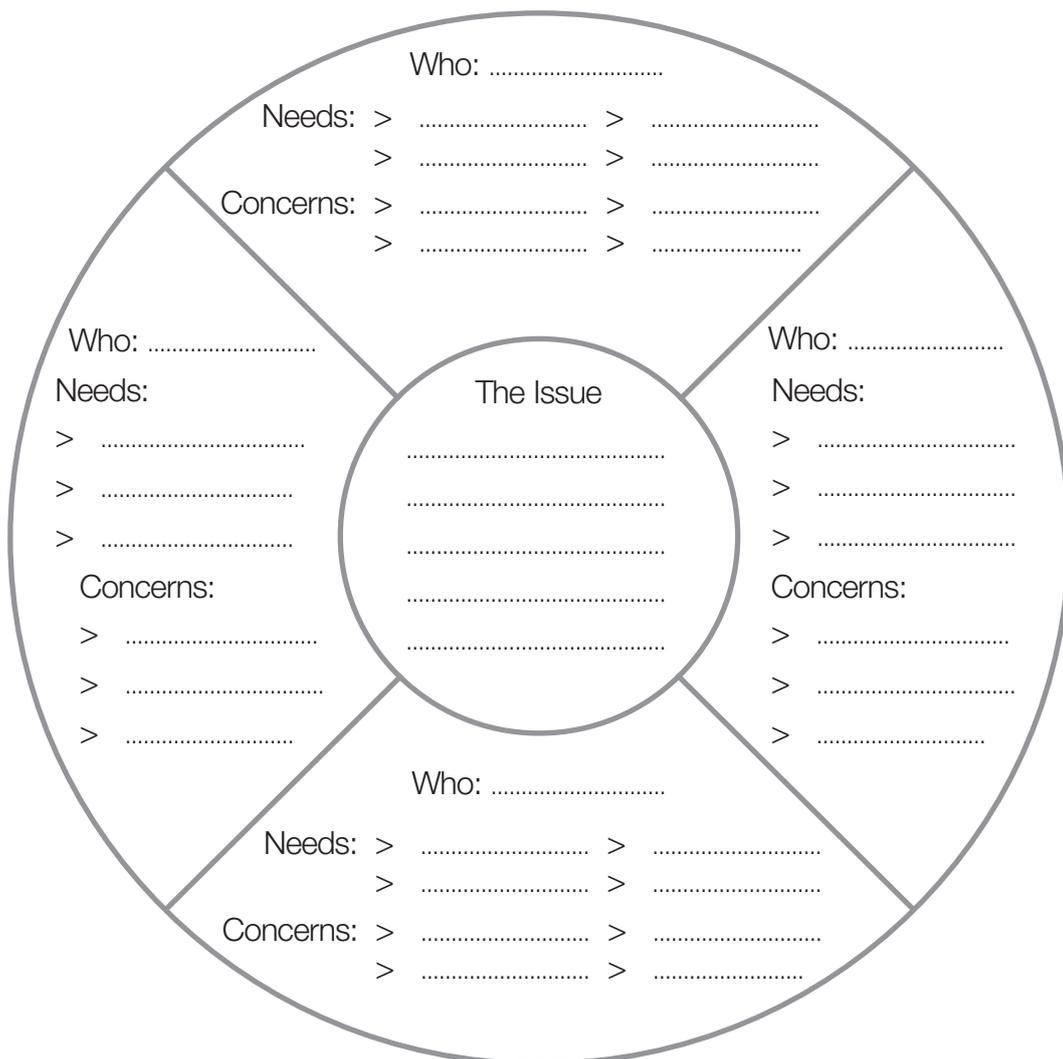
- ❖ From the perspective of the carer, who had the most power and who had the least? Why?
- ❖ From the perspective of the worker, who had the most power and who had the least? Why?
- ❖ From the perspective of the birth mother, who had the most power and who had the least? Why?

The Conflict Map

- A. In the **box** in the middle of the sheet, jot down your first thoughts about what is the issue that is causing concern in the story. *(only take 1-2 minutes to do this)*
- B. In the **segments of the large circle**, write down
 - > the name of each person from the story
 - > each person's needs *(What motivates him/her?)*, and
 - > each person's concerns, fears or anxieties.
- C. In the **centre of the circle**, write your final statement about the issue in the story. This may have changed since you noted your first thoughts.

Our first thought about what is the issue in this story

.....



Positive strategies for dealing with difficult situations

Seek explanation for decisions that have been taken – **seek understanding**

Request debriefing after placement ends – **seek closure**

Seek support from other carers – **seek support**

Reflect on what you have learnt/consider what you may do differently in the future – **seek to learn**

Remember what brought you into fostering – **seek to re-commit**

Take time out – **seek to rest**

Agree to disagree and move on – **seek perspective**

Use the opportunities you have to be heard eg case conferences, meetings with workers – **seek to use the structures effectively**

Roles and responsibilities cards

Photocopy each sheet three times, then cut these cards to make three sets, each with 24 cards, for the activity on p.7.

Make some decisions about child young person's wellbeing	Provide for the child's physical, emotional social and educational needs while they are away from their family
Work on their part of the care plan so the child or young person can be restored	Support children and young people in care
Arrange contact and debrief after contact	Assist in preparing child young person for restoration or adjustment to permanent care
Provide case management to ensure needs of children and young people are met	Respect the place of foster family in the child or young person's life
Make sure there is a clear workable care plan for the child and their family	Provide a child or young person with food, clothing, a bed, and meet their day to day needs
Select suitable foster families and match children to suitable families	Deal with negative behaviour in a positive way

Additional cards on the next page >>>

Roles and responsibilities cards (Continued)

Act as an advocate for the child or young person	Recognise, understand and promote child and young person's cultural, religious and linguistic heritage
Co-ordinate care plan, assisting the birth family and foster family to be involved as much as possible	Help a child young person to be heard and participate in decisions
Maintain connections with the child or young person while they are in care	Respect the place of birth family in the child or young person's life
Help the child or young person develop a positive sense of identity by contributing to life story work	Discuss child's young person's progress with agency/ department and ask for help when needed
Provide information to carer so as to enable them to understand the individual needs of the child or young person	Listen and respond to children, young persons fears, needs and concerns
Maintain contact with the caseworker in order to facilitate contact with the child or young person	Act as an advocate for the child with health, education, leisure, welfare etc

