

Lifelong relationships: an exploration of the importance of the child-parent relationship for children in care

by Jacinta Swann and Dr Sinead O'Malley

Introduction

Through the past 20 years of working with parents of children in care and young people in aftercare, Clarecare Family Support Services (FSS) has garnered a solid understanding, through practice, of the importance of the child-parent relationship for children in care. This article is based on a workshop delivered at the 2022 IFCA conference, entitled 'You're in my heart when we are apart' – which looked at the importance of the child-parent relationship for children in care.

In applying the conference theme, *Wrapped in Relationships*, the workshop explored Clarecare FSS's experience of the parent's contribution to the child's patchwork quilt, referred to as 'the wrapper of relationships' that surrounds their child, in care (IFCA, 2022). The workshop used this metaphor to elicit discussions with attendees on the importance of understanding, respecting and supporting the evolving lifelong relationships between children in care and their parents.

This article draws from the content of and discussion in that workshop. It outlines Clarecare FSS's experience of supporting and observing the child-parent relationship throughout the life course, the complexity of that relationship while the child is in care, and how child-parent contact is, and could be, better understood and supported during the care journey to enhance or sustain the unique child-parent relationship.

From foster care to adulthood – observing gender and becoming parents

Over the past 20 years, Clarecare FSS has worked with over 200 parents in the Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care, and 200 young people in the Aftercare Service for Young People Leaving Care. As a result, Clarecare FSS has had the privilege of supporting young people in aftercare who are transitioning out of care into adulthood and independent living, and supporting parents to participate in the care process when their child is in care.

Children in care grow into adulthood and go on to create their own lives. As parents, foster carers, and professionals working with and supporting these children and young people, our hope is for them to grow into resilient adults who can form positive relationships; as Hallas (2002) asserts, we're all here to support children to develop into functioning adults. Part of the work with children and young people is supporting them to understand, develop and sustain their relationships and family bonds while in care, which they can carry into adulthood, parenthood and beyond.

Clarecare FSS's experience over the years is that it is not uncommon for young people to seek to return to their parents, or seek support from them, at the point of transition from care. This experience is reflected in the research. Havlicek (2021) conducted a systematic review of birth parent–foster youth relationships before and after aging out of foster care. Findings show that 17 per cent of 19-year olds were living with parents after transitioning out of care. Clarecare FSS's observations of young people leaving care who seek to return to their parents, is that they are often the most vulnerable we have worked with. Mostly young males, they have experienced frequent placement breakdowns in their care history and have difficulties forming meaningful relationships.

Likewise, research findings regarding parents who sustain contact and bonds with their children in and after care is also gendered; by and large, it is mainly mothers who are engaging with the support systems wrapped around their child in care (Havlicek, 2021). Clarecare has a history of working with young people who have returned to their parents, but most often their mothers, as they transitioned out of care. A snapshot analysis of the Clarecare FSS Aftercare Service, involving 62 active cases, was undertaken for the purposes of this paper.

Findings show that of these current cases, 13 per cent (n=8) of young people had returned to their mothers, compared to 3 per cent (n=2) to their fathers, 1.6 per cent (n=1) to both parents together and 1.6 per cent (n=1) to their grandmother. In summary, approximately 19 per cent (or one fifth) of young people who are engaging with the Clarecare Aftercare Service have returned to their parents, most to their mothers. Havlicek (2021) found mothers are twice as likely to have contact with their adult children after care (compared to fathers), contact which consistently increases over time. Emotional closeness was also found to be twice as high between mothers and their adult children with care experience, compared to fathers (ibid).

Regardless of gender, the nature and understanding of relationships change for all children and young people at each developmental stage. This is particularly true when they become parents themselves, at a time when questions emerge about their own care. Very often it is during this time that care-experienced young adults seek support from their parents as they may feel isolated themselves or have questions about their own history they want answers to. Havlicek (2021) found nearly a fifth of former foster children who were parents at age 21 years reported their mothers served as a resource for parenting and/or a parenting role model, a trend which increased over time and with age.

It is interesting to consider the composition of the child-parent relationships being discussed, and whom services are most often working with and supporting. However, it is equally important to acknowledge all the other important people in the child's life. Hallas (2002) found most adults raised in a foster family sustain relationships with at least one parent as adults, however, grandparents and siblings play a huge role in the journey, regardless of the level of contact with their parents. In this small-scale study, former foster children were classed as 'exemplary adults' because they were able to form positive bonds and connections in adulthood, had finished school, and were in employment. This suggests that foster children's success in adulthood is not reliant on complete separation from their parents, but that support to navigate these relationships through the child's life into adulthood, along with an understanding of the difficulties inherent in their long journey, is an important factor.

In exploring this point, Samuel (2008) interviewed 29 former foster youths (aged 17-26 years). This study measured emotional closeness using circles. Forty four per cent of care-experienced young adults placed their parent in their innermost circle – signalling a person so important they could not imagine living without them. Thirty one per cent placed a parent in the middle circle – signalling an important relationship, albeit one that was not quite as close as in the inner circle. Overall, therefore, 75 per cent of young adults placed their parents in their circle, evidencing that regardless of the complexity of the child-parent relationship, children in care still value their parent's contribution to their lives and they are part of their understanding of who they are.

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relationship with their parent; they are part of one another. Even at times when the parent and child are not together, the connection between them still exists. ”

Complex relationships and bonds

Some young people who engage with Clarecare Aftercare Service often speak about feeling connected to their foster family, their parents, and extended family, without needing to return home. Others talk about benefiting, going forward, from the care on offer from both their parents and their foster parents. Understanding the complexity of these bonds is key to the work of Clarecare FSS. Van Holen et al, (2020) echo this, arguing the complexity of family bonds goes beyond any one typology, outlining three groups of family bonds experienced by children in care:

1. Children who had a bond with both their foster family and birth family.
2. Children who viewed their birth family as family and considered the foster family exclusively as a place to live.
3. Children who had a weak bond with their birth family and regarded their foster family as 'family'.

An important consideration, however (as also argued by Haight et al, 2003), is the awareness that if a child or young person develops positive attachments with their foster carer, this ought not to reflect negatively on their parent. It is important for children to form positive attachments, whatever that may look like. This does not mean their parent does not contribute to the patchwork quilt of relationships that surrounds their child, but rather, that at times those relationships need support; they need to be explored, developed or repaired so the child or young person has a stronger understanding of who they are, to enable them to grow into confident adults:

'How children experience their relationships [and] go through life ... [o]ver time, gaps or 'holes' may develop. For children in the foster care system, it's important that we attend to the quilt of their life with them by recognising areas in need of repair, areas where new 'patches' are required or desirable, and find ways to explore and illuminate the child's story of their life with them.' (IFCA, 2022).

Therefore, a key component of the patchwork quilt of relationships that wraps around

the child or young person in care, is their relationship with their parent; they are part of one another. Even at times when the parent and child are not together, the connection between them still exists.

Supporting child-parent relationships

Clarecare's Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care supports parents to participate in the care process for the well-being of their children. Over the 20 years since its inception, parents have consistently spoken about their love for their children, and their struggles in maintaining a relationship with them as they try to manage their own emotions while also engaging with the various support systems wrapped around them and their children. As Roe and O'Brien note in their work on parental participation: 'the underlying theme of hope amongst parents was evident, propelled hugely by their love for their children, and that it is this 'hope' which empowers and assists parents in engaging with the system.' (2019:62).

Yet, child-parent relationships are not always constructed through direct or frequent contact. Sometimes the parent's contribution to the patchwork quilt surrounding the child is more abstract; gifting the child a deeper sense of identity and belonging that goes beyond the here and now. The impact of child-parent relationships should be understood through various guises and often goes beyond the experience of hurt and pain caused and experienced.

The bond between foster children and their birth family [is] complex, for many even problematic, yet still important ... Many foster children [speak] with great loyalty and eagerness to forgive, but were also concerned [about their] parents.'

(Van Holen et al, 2020:6).

Even if a parent is deceased, or in prison (O'Malley and Devaney, 2016; O'Malley et al, 2021) there is still a relationship of sorts with them because child and parent are part of one another. This observation through the work on the ground in Clarecare FSS is echoed by Van Holen et al's (2020) work on family bonds with children in care. Some of the children in their study had no, or limited, contact with their parents. However, Van Holen et al, (2020:5) found that, despite this, most still felt connected to their parents.

"My real mom means a lot to me. She brought me into this world. In any way, mother comes first. But (...) I never really had that strong bond with her. That's a bit more difficult (...).

But we can still make something of it, eh! (...) I just hope I'm going to be in contact with her again. I only saw her once, since I went away when I was two years old. It's been five years since I've seen her." (Arne)

Appreciating that children in care experience family bonds and relationships in a myriad of ways is important. More important is how the child or young person is supported to reflect on and understand their complex relationships with their parents and siblings, so they can cope throughout their care journey while living apart. Clarecare FSS's experience is that positive outcomes are most often achieved for children and young people when parents, foster parents, and social workers have worked well together, where the parent was acknowledged for their contribution and the young person can see this. In reality, it is about acknowledging that:

'Most foster children feel connected with their foster family and with their birth family. Especially when both families work well together, foster children develop a sense of belonging with both families. Nonetheless, the feeling of belonging does not imply they want to return to their birth family. Thus, it requires a great deal of flexibility from foster children to keep valuing both families.' (Van Holen et al, 2020:2).

Clarecare FSS have witnessed how child–parent relationships evolve and change over time as the young person grows and develops. There is an emphasis on the uniqueness of each young person in the context of the relationships they are wrapped in, and in turn the need for those who care for them to be cognisant of the opportunities to support the ever-evolving nature of their relationships, most importantly their interpersonal relationship with their parents.

Visits and contact

Family visits and contact between child and parent are the main ways that the child–parent relationship is supported over their time while in care. These are not normal situations, and as noted by Haight et al, (2003), they can be highly stressful and manipulated environments, for all involved. In these challenging spaces, foster carers and social workers can also feel conflicted about the impact on the child after a difficult visit, where parents may not have turned up or are not able to express their care for the child in appropriate or expected ways.

It is important to continue to reflect on what may be influencing these behaviours.

Haight et al, (2003:198) remind us that even secure children display difficult behaviours when they witness their parents stressed, while also highlighting that ‘the parent who calls to cancel visits and the child who refuses to approach a parent may each be expressing the pain of separation’, rather than showing the bond doesn’t exist at any level. Roe and O’Brien (2019:62) assert:

‘It is important that Tusla engage with vulnerable parents in meaningful participation, that resources and new ways of working with parents of children in care are developed to ensure that the access experience and the overall outcomes for children in care continue to improve.’

Such trauma and experiences of loss can lead to emotional reactions and contradictory feelings for both the parent and child which is often played out in behaviours during and after access. Supporting the relationships and bonds between children in care and their parents is not easy work, especially in times of distress, or when a parent or child are not responding well to each other’s needs in the moment. While significant effort goes into organising the practicalities of getting to access, and creating spaces for the child and parent to meet, little focus is spent on how the dynamics in the room are managed with a view to understanding and supporting the child–parent relationship. As Swann (2022) asserts, there is a need to ‘focus on how parents and children can interact in calmer, more positive ways that acknowledge the stress involved, rather than expecting everyone to perform as if it’s normal’.

Clarecare FSS’s recently undertook a consultation process with parents of children in care in order to inform a potential practical framework for access with their children in care.¹ During the consultation, parents spoke about the hopeful anticipation of meeting their child, particularly if there had been months between visits, but also expressed their sense of helplessness about how to manage the situation; ‘how do I do it right? Parents shared their distress when a visit had not gone well and how the loss of their child is relived in those moments. A common reflection was summed up well by one mother: ‘being watched and observed is stressful for children as well, you feel like you are making a mistake and judged – my son is thinking that way too’.²

Decisions made about the frequency and nature of family visits have potential long-term implications for the relationships children develop with their parents, siblings and extended family, so these decisions need to be made in an informed way which can be understood by all.

If the collective focus is placed on the long-term goal of supporting children to understand, develop and sustain healthy lifelong relationships with their parents, then the approach to support child-parent relationships has the potential to shift from short-term responses, to a response focused on the long-term relationships.

Conclusion

Clarecare FSS's longstanding experience in working with young people in aftercare and parents of children in care, has meant working with children and parents at different transitions in and throughout the care journey. This experience highlights the importance of supporting the child-parent relationship through understanding and respecting their bond in more complex ways. The uniqueness of each family circumstance and the complex web of relationships on the journey that young people have to navigate through care is acknowledged as they, and support systems around them, mind and repair the patchwork quilt that envelopes them; 'as children go through life [...] it's as though this blanket, or quilt, gathers more layers, or 'patches.'" (IFCA, 2022).

Being in care is the first quarter of the child or young person's life – at most. The relationship with their parent continues long after the child has left the care system in ways that are unique to them and often unknown to most. As foster carers and support services who work with children in care and their parents, there are opportunities for us to acknowledge the ever-evolving nature of their relationships and support the creation of a relationship quilt with beautiful colours and depth.

About the authors

Jacinta Swann is a principal social worker with extensive experience in family support, child protection, children in care and aftercare services in Ireland. She has been instrumental in the development and management of the Clarecare Advocacy Service for Parents of Children in Care and has managed the Clarecare Aftercare Service for young people leaving care for over 20 years. Through Jacinta's direct work with parents of children in care, she is committed to supporting parent's meaningful contribution to the care process, for the well-being of their children.

Dr Sinead O'Malley is a qualified social worker with experience working in the area of homelessness, child protection, children in care and with the Irish Traveller Community in the voluntary and statutory services. Prior to recently joining Clarecare Family Support

Services, she worked as an independent social worker and research consultant. Sinead has been researching and publishing on children's rights, child protection, participation and the criminal justice system since 2012. Her research and publications have explored maternal incarceration and the importance of children in care sustaining meaningful relationships with their mothers.

Endnotes

- ¹ This work is undertaken alongside Aoife Bairéad of mindsinmind.ie
- ² Direct quotes are from parents, recorded during the consultation process.

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