**Post fostering changes support group 2**

**This will take place between 4 and 5 months after completion of the programme**

**Guidelines:**

The support groups provide carers with a vehicle to meet together post completion of the programme to catch up with each other, review strategies and have an opportunity to share current challenges as well as positive change in their children and young people.

The structure follows that of the programme with facilitators modelling positive reinforcement of carers’ efforts and validating the skills and qualities carers have continued to use in their daily lives with the young people they look after.

The focus is strengths based and practical with an interactive style which uses the strategies based on social learning and attachment theory to problem solve difficulties.

**Equipment needed:**

Chocolate for the chocolate mindfulness practice

Attention Table Handout

‘Identify three things you will regularly do to look after yourself’ handout

Flip chart.

Three examples for instructions and consequences to be written on flip chart

**Session**

**10.00 Welcome and opening round**.

‘Tell the group something positive that has happened in your life since the last time we met.’

**10.05 Aims**

**-**To provide an opportunity to catch up with one another

-To problem solve challenges and celebrate successes

-To revisit strategies and ensure their continued use in everyday life

**10.05 Feedback** - how are things?

Go around the group using the tile to keep to time. Ask each carer to share how things have been for them and their children since we last met. Ask each carer to take about 5 mins. If there are particular issues that have come up that they would like to discuss today, put it up on flip chart for further discussion later. Avoid spending time during this part to go into detail but let them know there is space to discuss later. Remember to validate carers’ experiences and provide praise for what they have managed since the course ended.

**10.35 Motivator** A mindfulness practice – a chocolate or fruit meditation practice.

**Chocolate meditation Exercise**

* For the chocolate meditation, you need a small piece of chocolate for each participant. (you could offer a choice of dark chocolate or a malteser). Go around the group giving a piece of chocolate to each participant and asking them to hold it in their hand.
* Tell your group to take a few deep breaths to relax. Close their eyes if comfortable to do that. Alternatively, lower their eyes and focus on something about six feet ahead of them.
* Tell them to put the chocolate into their mouths. Let it sit on their tongue and melt in their mouths. Tell them to notice the flavours and become completely absorbed in what they are experiencing *right now.* Continue to breathe deeply and concentrate on the sensations in their mouths.
* As they swallow, tell them to focus on how it feels going down. Notice how their mouths feel and focus on the sensations they are feeling in the present moment.
* If other thoughts come into their minds during the chocolate meditation, tell them to gently refocus their attention to the flavours and sensations associated with the chocolate. The idea is to stay in the present moment as much as they possibly can.

Afterwards ask participants how they found this exercise, was it easy, difficult, enjoyable? Were they able to focus on the taste of the chocolate, the sensation of it melting? What did they notice? Did they have lots of thoughts running through their heads? Were they able to let these go? Did they follow one thought more than the other? Did their breathing slow down?

Tell participants this is a mindfulness exercise which can help with stress. We want to think with the group today about stress and looking after ourselves.

**Stress and Looking after ourselves:**

We appreciate that family life is a busy juggling act. It can be easy to forget to schedule things to look after ourselves, or for those things to fall lower on the priority lists. There are very good reasons why looking after yourselves should be a top priority!

1. Pressure can lead to stress when we feel unable to cope.
2. Pressures can be large discreet events, or a build-up of lots of smaller events. “We lost Jimmy’s shoes, he was late for school…relations with school are already difficult… Jimmy came home with a letter for bad behaviour…”
3. Pressures can be good, or bad. Planning a holiday for example, though good and exciting, can be stressful.
4. Pressures can also lead to stress when the stressor itself hasn’t changed, but our resources have, e.g. if we are unwell, tired or the childminder is away – the same daily pressure can lead to more stress.

Draw a hot cross bun on flip chart paper.

Put some of the scenarios e.g. ‘*relations with school are really difficult, you have to plan the summer holidays, you’ve lost Sandra’s shoes*’ under trigger then ask participants, ‘How do you know you’re stressed? What will people see you doing/saying? What you will be thinking?

As participants contribute put suggestions under the appropriate heading ‘thoughts, feelings, behaviour’. For example they might suggest ‘*I become really irritable*’ put this under behaviour but also ask them what would I see you doing? They might suggest ‘*shouting or telling the children to be quiet and go away*’ . Under thoughts you might have: ‘*I’m dreading the summer holidays. They are always so difficult…and they haven’t even started yet!.*’ Under feelings you might have: tearful or overwhelmed.

Remind participants that these are all interlinked. The way we think affects the way we feel and the way we behave – go through an example on the flip chart. Likewise the way we behave how we think and feel about ourselves e.g. if we shout at Johnny when he comes home from being excluded at school later we may think ‘*oh I am such a bad carer for shouting at Johnny*’ this may lead us to feel guilty worthless, low which then in turn may affect our behaviour resulting in us not wanting to do anything etc.

Once you have a good number of suggestions from carers, under each of the headings remove the flip chart. Blu tak it underneath another prepared flip chart with the same headings.

Remind carers about negative automatic thoughts (NATS). Go through some of the words we use when we are stressed: never (I never get this right!) always: (It always happens to me). Mention the catastrophizing we do: This is the worst job I have ever had! The children are so badly behaved, they’ll never make and keep friends.

Remind carers that we want to change NATS to PATS (positive alternative thoughts) and give an example: The children do behave badly but they are warm and engaging and they both have at least one friend!

Then go through the NATS on the flip chart and ask carers to change their NATS to PATS. Put them on the new hot cross bun. Get other carers to help with suggestions if some are struggling. Following this ask carers if this is how you are now feeling and write suggestions on the flip chart, then do the same for behaviour. These should now be more appropriate and coping statements.

Get some feedback from the group about how they experienced the exercise and encourage them to use the format to manage stressful situations. By way of introduction to the next teaching section explain that it is important in the long term to have strategies for stress. Give the handout on managing stress and mindfulness.

**What is the stress reaction?**

The role of stress and particularly stress hormones is to prepare the body to resolve threatening situations. Stress is a physiological state, driven by adrenaline that causes the fight / fright or freeze response

**What is the impact of stress?**

Stress hormones over long periods of time impact on our physiology, our physical and mental health, our thoughts, feelings and what we do:

1. Breathing rate/heart rate and blood pressure increases
2. Blood sugar level increases
3. It lowers our immune system
4. Increased risk of hypertension, depression, anxiety and stomach ulcers.
5. Difficulties sleeping
6. Becoming forgetful

**How does stress impact on our parenting?**

Stress impacts on many of the skills that the carers will have developed when attending fostering changes.

**Attention:** Positive psychology research has shown that when we experience neutral or positive emotional states we have a broader focus of attention. We are therefore able to notice the good things that our children have done and praise them. When we are experiencing negative emotions, including stress, we have a narrow focus of attention. If we are in a bad mood, everything seems bad and we will be less able to spot those little glimmers of light.

**Responding to aversive behaviour:** If we’re feeling stressed and we have these stress hormones racing around our bodies, we are prepared for a fight/flight/freeze response. We can therefore respond in a way that shows our anger or frustration. This is a form of attention and can be reinforcing for the child.

**Communication:** We know that stress impacts on our thoughts, so it naturally affects what we say. But it also impacts on how we say it: keeping warmth and sensitivity in the tone of your voice is really important and can be lost when we feel stressed or under pressure.

**Problem Solving:** Positive psychology research again has demonstrated that when we are feeling neutral or positive emotions we are better able to problem solve. This may be helping our child to problem solve, liaising successfully with school after a bad day to resolve an issue for example.

**The research:** Research shows that adding in a parent stress management component when parents are learning parenting skills leads to improved child behaviour. So parents being better able to manage their feelings, really does impact on how their children behave.

**Identify three things you WILL regularly do to look after yourself:**

1…………………………………………………………………………………………

2.……………………………………………………………………………………

3.………………………………………………………………………………………

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is the practice of living in the present moment. With so many demands on us we usually don’t do this (e.g. driving and planning dinner). We are often on “automatic pilot” and it can be hard to focus on the here and now. Mindfulness originated within Buddhist philosophies but is now widely used in the Western world as it has been found to be beneficial for the many demands placed on us.

It now has an evidence base:

* Grossman, Paul, Ludger Niemann, Stefan Schmidt, and Harald Walach. 2004. Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* 57, (1) (07): 35-43.
* Hofmann*,* SG, Sawyer, AT, Witt, AA et al. 2010 The effect of mindfulness-based therapy on anxiety and depression: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*;**78**:169–83

Mindfulness is also about noticing any feelings, associations and judgements that you have. It is about noticing the judgements that we make and then letting go of them, if only for that moment. (e.g. noticing that you feel angry when a car undertakes you but not acting on that feeling).

**How can it help with stress?**

Mindfulness can help us to tolerate a feeling and circumstance that cannot be changed right now. It can help us to remain calm until it is an appropriate time to find a solution. (e.g. during an argument with a family member). It allows you to “sit with” the difficult feeling until you can manage the situation more helpfully. Research has also shown that regular mindfulness practice can help more generally with managing stress (e.g. CPD, depression, anxiety, anger management, concentration).

Mindfulness is a skill that takes practice! It is not easy at first as our brains are naturally built to be busy and to manage many demands at once. It is important to practice mindfulness when you are calm and relaxed, just like learning to swim it is best to practice in the shallow end rather than waiting until you’re drowning to try and learn!

**10.55 Motivator**: to change focus. Cross crawl.

**11.00. Theory review**: **The reinforcement rule and attention table**. The importance of labelled praise and selective ignoring of minor misbehaviour, especially during escalation.

Give out and go through attention table handout.

Remind carers of the reward and reinforcement rule and the importance of being consistent, appropriate, immediate and contingent when reinforcing new behaviours. Re-visit continuous and intermittent reinforcement and when to use each.

Reinforcement refers to any response to a behaviour which makes the behaviour **more likely**to be repeated in the future. A pay-off occurs when behaviour is rewarded. Praise, rewards and attention act as pay-offs. Behaviour that gets a pay-off is more likely to occur again. Avoiding something unpleasant acts as a pay-off. Reinforcement is very important in shaping people’s behaviour

Continuous reinforcement is used to establish new behaviours/routines. The most obvious example of this is when we potty train children and initially praise them just for getting the potty out, then for sitting on it and so on. Once a child has become accomplished at using

the potty we then revert to praising them every now and then because the behaviour has become established. This is intermittent reinforcement and is what helps to maintain behaviour. Problems occur when we reinforce behaviour when not meaning to. A good example of how intermittent reinforcement maintains behaviour is a gambling analogy; gamblers do no win every time but every now and then and it is this occasional reinforcement which keeps them gambling.

Problems occur when we unwittingly provide pay-offs for undesirable behaviour. Reward charts/schemes are a good short term mechanism to establishing new routines and behaviours. Reward charts require careful and detailed thinking through in relation to the desired behaviour. Useful for bedtimes, self-care routines, homework, getting ready for school, behaviour in restaurants etc. Some carers may prefer spontaneous reward schemes such as marble jars, luck dips etc.

Sometimes it may feel to carers that there is a huge gulf between a child’s behaviour and how they want them to behave. Some carers may struggle to identify any appropriate behaviours in the child which can be praised or positively reinforced. **Shaping** helps children to learn a new positive behaviour by breaking it down into smaller and more manageable steps. This is particularly useful for when the current behaviour looks very different from the desired behaviour.

When there is a natural order to a desired behaviour it can also be useful to work through these. This is called **chaining**, e.g. if a parent wanted a child to help out at breakfast time they could start by asking them to get the cereal and their bowl out, then add additional tasks (for example, lay the table, pour the milk, and put breakfast things in the dishwasher afterwards). Chaining can happen over a series of days or weeks so that bits are added to the chain gradually. A child or young person can be praised and rewarded for each step. As the behaviour becomes established rewards can then be phased to only happen intermittently but it is good to still use specific labelled praise to help maintain the desired behaviour.

Children learn by watching other people and modelling their behaviour. Modelling can increase the incidence of appropriate behaviour in children, either by teaching positive new behaviours or increasing the probability that existing appropriate behaviours will be repeated. Carers have a key role in this process, particularly because their children may be more likely to model behaviours observed in them than other people.

In order to increase appropriate behaviours in children, carers need to be mindful of how they behave in front of their children, and what symbolic modelling their children have access to (via the TV and other media sources).

11.40 **Lunch**

12.00 Motivator: Go around the group saying your name and describing yourself as an animal that starts with the same sound as your name e. I’m Kathy koala, I’m Bryn badger.

**12.05 Strategy review and practice**: Giving clear calm instructions, warnings, consequences.

Go through ABC and insert instructions and consequences where they belong in Social Learning Theory.

Have 3 examples of instructions and consequences written on flip chart. Model first and then ask carers to get into threes.

Give them 10 minutes to come up with an example they can use from their current child or yp in placement or if they do not have one, suggest they can use one of the examples provided. Decide what the behaviour is, what the instruction and consequence will be and how they will be delivered.

1. Ivor (11yrs) holds the TV control, flicking through the channels and not letting Matthew watch his agreed programme.
2. Carys (9yrs) won’t change out of her school uniform and keeps saying she’ll do it later.
3. Dylan (13yrs) is refusing to have his daily shower and is beginning to smell.

In threes (with one as an observer each time), each carer practice giving a warning followed by an instruction and when there is non- compliance, follow by a warning and consequence ( if ….then).

Facilitators need to go around the groups as they are practising giving support and encouragement.

**12.40 Feedback** to large group.

**12.50 Closing round**. One thing I would like to praise myself for or one strategy that I have used well or one way I have become more confident since last support group.

**12.55 Evaluation** (measures?)