ASSESSING POLYAMOROUS PROSPECTIVE FOSTER CARERS

Introduction

This practice note has been written in response to requests for guidance from social work practitioners who have been asked to assess polyamorous foster carers, and who lack confidence that they have good enough knowledge to do this to a high standard. It is worth acknowledging at the outset, that it would have been desirable to have had input from those with lived experience of polyamorous fostering. Unsuccessful efforts were made to locate such individuals. It is hope that future work in this area will be informed by such lived experience, but for now, it is better to have some guidance, even if it is less than perfect.

Polyamory relates to consensual multiple-partner relationships, and is defined by Hardy and Easton (2017, p.7) as follows:

Polyamory was coined in 1992… formed from Latin and Greek roots that translate as 'loving many'… It is often abbreviated as 'poly', as in 'I am a poly person.' Some use it to mean multiple committed live-in relationships, forms of group marriage; others use it as an umbrella word to cover all forms of sex and love and domesticity outside conventional monogamy.

For Sheff (2016, p.258) polyamory is about committed long-term intimate relationships, which she distinguishes from recreational sex with multiple partners. She further points out that polyamorous relationships do not require a sexual relationship, and talks about 'polyaffectivity' which is defined as 'emotional intimacy among non-sexual participants linked by poly relationships' (Sheff, 2016, p.276).

There are other terms that are used to describe such relationships, but these are arguably less good than 'polyamory'. The term 'consensual non-monogamy' is often used as an umbrella term that encompasses 'polyamory' and activities like 'swinging', but is arguably problematic in that it emphasises difference from the mainstream norm. 'Polygamy' indicates formal marriages rather than relationships and so does not work so widely, especially since it is unlawful in the UK. In working with polyamorous prospective foster carers, it is important to discuss the terminology that they prefer, and what that means for them.

Multiple-partner marriages have existed in different cultures and religious sub-cultures throughout history, usually in the form of 'polygyny', where one man can marry multiple wives. In some parts of the world such arrangements continue to exist, and data from the Pew Research Centre (Kramer, 2020) indicates that 'about 2% of the global population live in polygamous households, and in the vast majority of countries, that share is under 0.5%.' It is most common in some parts of Africa and the Middle East, and Islamic law permits a man to marry up to four wives, which is also legal in several Muslim-majority countries. Certain fundamentalist religious sects also practice polygyny, but represent a tiny fraction of the global population.

Polyamory is more widespread than polygamy, which is not surprising given that the latter practice is illegal in most of the world. There is limited data on the extent of polyamory, but a YouGov poll (2025) found that 1% of UK adults are currently in a polyamorous relationship, and 3% have previously been in such a relationship. From a fostering perspective it is important that we don't exclude any groups of people from becoming foster carers, if they can effectively meet the needs of children, and there is nothing in the fostering regulations, guidance or standards, that would prohibit the approval of a polyamorous group.

For the most part, polyamorous fostering applicants should be assessed in the same way as other prospective foster carers, which means exploring parenting experience and capacity, and all the other factors identified as being necessary to foster effectively (Chapman, 2019). Like all other groups of people, some polyamorous individuals will be suitable to foster, and others will not.

There are however matters that might be slightly different for polyamorous applicants compared with monogamous or single carers, or might need particular consideration or exploration. Thinking about these areas is not about discriminating against polyamorous applicants, but about understanding difference, and considering how that might be significant in a fostering context.

Research evidence

There is no research evidence that is specific to polyamorous fostering, and very little that considers parenting by polyamorous parents. There are however a few studies from outside the UK, that are relevant to thinking about the potential for polyamorous fostering.

(Sheff, 2020) provides findings from a longitudinal study of polyamorous families that started in 1996 in the USA, and includes interviews with children of different ages to understand their experiences. She concludes that younger children are largely unaware of the fact that their families are different to most others, and although teenagers are mindful of the differences, they are 'far more concerned with their own lives and invested in their own social worlds' (Sheff, 2020, p.9).

By the time of reaching adulthood, those who have grown up in polyamorous families tend to be well-adjusted and capable young people.

Sheff finds that there are practical and emotional advantages for children living in polyamorous families. She explains that these advantages look slightly different at different ages, but having relationships with more than two parenting adults is generally seen to be a good thing, although lack of privacy can also be an issue for some older children. Social stigma is identified as the primary disadvantage for the children, although this does not occur that often, and children usually develop effective strategies for managing or avoiding conversations that they do not want to have.

Another study (Alarie et al, 2024) uses data from interviews with 18 children aged about 5-16 in Canadian polyamorous families. These children generally describe positive relations with their parent's partners, who offer emotional support, practical help, and bring positive social and leisure experiences. For younger children in particular, relationships with parental partners were emotionally close. Older children saw the benefits of their parents being happy in these relationships, even if their own relationships with those adults were not particularly close. None of the children in the study spoke negatively about being in a polyamorous family.

Alongside the interviews with children, Alarie (2024) interviewed 34 parents and partners, to explore their perception of the benefits and challenges of polyamorous parenting. Overall, the adults felt that polyamorous living arrangements were beneficial to them and their children. In particular they noted the benefits that came with having multiple supportive adults to help with childcare and with emotional support, and living in a polyamorous arrangement offered an opportunity to model good communication, honesty, and respect. Some parents did struggle with stigma and finding the time to maintain multiple relationships while parenting, but overall felt that the benefits outweighed the challenges.

Based on interviews with a number of polyamorous parents in the USA study, Sheff (2009) categorised the benefits that they identified from their multiple partner relationship status:

- Being able to establish emotional intimacy with their children, based on replicating and role-modelling the approach that they have to use when building trust through honest, careful, and effective communication with their adult partners.
- The increased resources that come with multiple-adult families, including the benefits of shared incomes, and the sharing of household tasks.
- Parents noted that they were happier when they are getting more of their needs met, and felt that this was more easily achieved through having multiple partners. Happy parents are more likely to be good parents.
- Having multiple parents and carers mean that children have the opportunity for close relationships with more than one or two adults. They are also part of wider networks and communities, meaning that they have access to more non-parental trusted adults.

In terms of the disadvantages that come with polyamorous parenting, the parents identified two main areas:

- Children can sometimes become emotionally attached to the parents' partners, who might later exit the children's lives if the adult relationship ended. This is no different to a situation where a monogamous parent separates from a step-parent.
- The social stigma of polyamory may impact on children, which on occasions can mean being rejected by birth families, and criticised or ostracised by the wider community.

Pallotta-Chiarolli et al (2013) established a focus group with thirteen Australian polyamorous parents to explore their experiences of raising children. As with studies from elsewhere, the parents described the parenting benefits that come with having multiple adults in the same household, including close bonds with the children. The parents also described a stigma associated with polyamory, meaning that they needed to navigate education and health systems that did not expect to work with such families. They also needed to balance protecting children from stigma, with being honest and nurturing.

We need to be careful about reaching firm conclusions based on very limited evidence, all of which comes from outside of the UK. There is not enough evidence to claim that polyamory is either beneficial or harmful to children, but on the basis of what is known, it would appear that:

- There is no reason to believe that children in polyamorous families are less likely than their peers to have positive developmental outcomes.
- Children can benefit from having strong emotional bonds with multiple parents or carers, and from the wider family and community networks that come with this type of family.
- There may be practical benefits from living in a polyamorous family in terms of time available for child related activities, and for managing other household tasks.
- Social stigma can be a negative factor, but polyamorous families can and do find effective ways to manage that, in a similar way to gay and lesbian families.

The assessor

Monogamous relationships are the norm in Western societies, and it is important that assessors remain open-minded and non-judgemental about people who choose other family structures. The research cited above indicates that polyamorous people can parent children effectively, and there is no reason to think that caring for foster children should be any different.

With regards to safeguarding, as with any other assessment, assessors should not assume that polygamous people pose a risk to children, but neither should they assume the opposite.

Safeguarding reviews teach us that assessors should always be professionally curious, and 'think the unthinkable' and this is not influenced by matters of sexuality or fidelity.

De Jong and Donnelly (2015, p.42) write in the context of assessing gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers, but the point they make is equally relevant to assessing polyamorous applicants:

Assessing social workers need to reflect on their own knowledge, experiences and prejudices before embarking on... assessment. As with all aspects of assessment work, the social worker will bring their own values and beliefs into the work, and having the space and opportunity for reflective supervision is very important. It is essential that assessments are rigorous and evidence-based and that analysis is based on this evidence and verification. The welfare of the child remains the paramount factor...

In the absence of evidence, and at the risk of generalising, it might be reasonable to speculate that polyamorous applicants will be particularly apprehensive about the assessment process, and be worried about whether the assessor will make assumptions and/or be prejudiced against them. This would be consistent with their experiences in other areas of society, and might lead applicants to be overly compliant, or struggle to fully share aspects of their lives. Social workers may need to make particular efforts to develop trusting relationships, and to provide reassurances that they will endeavour to complete a fair assessment.

Issues in assessment

Household composition

Fostering systems have traditionally assumed that households will consist of one or two adults, and although there are rare occasions when triads have been approved (such as siblings or cross generation family groups), multi-partner arrangements fall outside of the norm.

Different polyamorous families will have different living arrangements, and partners may live in the same household, live elsewhere but stay overnight on a regular basis, or rotate residency between the group. In undertaking an assessment, it will be important to decide which individuals are being assessed as foster carers, and in the context of couple relationships, the key issue is whether they are 'sharing the care' of a child (see Adams, 2017). Adams (2017) notes that where a couple are living together, they will almost always need to be assessed as foster carers, and where a person is in a couple relationship but living outside of the household, it will still be appropriate to assess them as potential foster carers if they likely to be 'sharing the care' of the child.

These principles should be applied equally to adults in polyamorous arrangements, meaning that where a person is living in the household (full-time or part-time) they will need to be assessed as a foster carer. Where a member of the group is living at another address, they will need to be assessed as a foster carer if they are deemed to be 'sharing the care of the child'. If they are having no, or very minimal involvement with the child, then there is no requirement to assess them as foster carers.

Schadler (2021) identifies three types of polyamorous parenting arrangements:

- Poly-nuclear parenting refers to situations where two people are responsible for parenting tasks. Even though other romantic relationships exist, these individuals are not involved in the parenting task. In this situation, the 'other' individual or individuals would not need to be assessed as a foster carers.
- Egalitarian Parenting is where three or more parents share parenting duties as equally as possible, and responsibility is continually negotiated, without a hierarchy of roles. In this situation, all parents would need to be assessed as foster carers.
- Hierarchical Parenting describes situations where three or more people are involved in the parenting task, but they have unequal involvement. In this model there will be one or two 'main parents' with others playing a more limited parenting role. In this situation it is likely that all parties would need to be assessed as foster carers, but will depend on the extent of the care being offered to children.

Stability of relationships

It is important that all foster carers can offer stability to the children that they care for, not least because many of these children will have come from family situations where stability and reliability have not been present. In assessing this matter with polyamorous families, the same questions that are used in assessing couple relationships will be relevant. Chapman (2019, p11) suggests the analysis should consider:

- What evidence is there that the applicant's current relationship is a secure and stable one?
- Is there evidence to suggest that this relationship is strong enough to deal with the stresses and strains that fostering can bring?
- Is there evidence of mutual support?
- Could a foster child exploit any areas of vulnerability in the relationship?

The exploration of polyamorous relationships should have similarities with how an assessor explores these issues with monogamous couples, but the nature and complexity of polyamory might mean more time and reflection is needed to consider these issues fully. According to Sheff (2016, p.267):

Polyamorists routinely face the possibility of jealousy, hurt feelings, and miscommunication among many partners. While monogomists experience these same difficulties in their own relationships, the increased number of people in polyamorous relationships multiplies the opportunities for miscommunication significantly.

It is important that assessors do not make an assumption that

polyamory conflates with instability, and each family should be considered on its own merits. Some families will be very stable over long periods, and others less so. An assessment should explore the length and stability of relationships, and depending on the circumstances might also want to ask questions such as:

- *How do you manage when relationships change or end?*
- *Can you describe how you have handled a significant relationship change?*
- *How would you continue to meet a child's needs in such circumstances?*
- *What contingency plans would you make for relationships changing?*

It may also be necessary to look at stability in a slightly different way than it is usually considered when applied to monogamous relationships. For Sheff (2016, p.275):

My data indicates that poly relationships may not last in the traditional sense of permanently retaining the same form. Instead, some poly relationships appear to last more durably than some brittle monogamous relationships because the polys can flex to meet different needs over time in a way that monogamous relationships – with their abundant norms and requirements of sexual fidelity – find more challenging.

In other words, 'polyamorists are able to sustain resilient relationships even as the exact form of the relationship shifts over time' (Sheff, 2026 p. 274) which will often mean that strong connections remain, even after a sexual relationship ends. This could be important in thinking about how a child might be impacted in the context of changing relationships.

Practicalities of parenting

While the assessment of roles and responsibilities will not be fundamentally different for polyamorous families compared with monogamous couples, it will likely be complicated by having more adults to consider. The following questions which are entirely relevant when assessing a couple, should also be addressed when considering multi-parent arrangements:

- *How will care-giving tasks be shared and coordinated?*
- *How will you ensure consistency in routines, expectations, and boundaries?*
- *How will you manage disagreement between adults about parenting approaches?*
- *Who will take the lead when a child is distressed or dysregulated?*

Considering stigma

There is evidence throughout the research to suggest that being polyamorous can result in discrimination, and for children in these families it can lead to unwanted attention and bullying. Sheff (2016 p.266) suggests that the 'issues facing poly families… closely mirror those confronting families of other sexual minorities.'

De Jong and Donnelly (2015, p.58) encourage assessors of gay and lesbian applicants to consider the potential for bullying as a result of family composition, but to do this within a broad context that will be equally relevant for all prospective foster carers:

Can the applicants support a child who is being bullied (for whatever reason), as well as support a child who might demonstrate bullying behaviour towards others?

Do they have the ability to communicate clearly with schools and other social networks, and are they able to integrate in the local school/community?…How would they support their children in explaining family relationships and other issues of difference to peers?

Given the stigma associated with polyamory, prospective foster carers may be particularly concerned about how their personal data is going to be shared with others. They may need to have detailed conversations with the assessor about this, and may need to be reassured that the fostering service has robust arrangements in place to ensure that data is only shared as necessary, and in line with legislative guidance.

Strengths based assessment

Although some fostering services may feel anxious or under-confident in relation to assessing and approving polyamorous foster carers, it might be argued that this group potentially bring strengths that are not routinely evident with single or monogamous carers. It is important that assessors take full account of these strengths when undertaking an assessment.

- Polyamorous families need to have strong communication skills, in order to negotiate relationship boundaries, discuss feelings, and resolve conflicts, since without these they will not endure (Sheff, 2016). 'Poly community members also value persistence and the ability to tolerate conflict' (Sheff, 2016, p.267). These are skills and attributes that will be an asset when working with children who have experienced abuse and neglect.
- In most polyamorous arrangements more than two adults will be approved as foster carers, meaning that mutual support is built into the arrangement. In a context where foster carers are often required to identify a 'back-up carer' or other 'support network', that will likely be less of an issue for polyamorous applicants. Having more fostering adults in a household, will also usually mean more grandparents, relatives and friends to support with the fostering task, and the benefits of this to children are set out in the research.
- Polyamorous families will need to have demonstrated resilience in coping with the stigma and discrimination that they will likely have experienced, and that sort of resilience is very important in fostering.
- The nature of polyamorous arrangements might also bring a non-traditional approach to parenting and family life that will suit some foster children, which might particularly be the case for LGBTQ+ children, or for those who are questioning their sexual identity or sexuality.

Conclusion

Polyamorous applicants should be assessed in relation to the requirements for all foster carers, and being polyamorous is not associated with parenting capacity, positively or negatively. There are aspects of an assessment that might need to be explored in a slightly different way, as discussed above, but these differences are minimal in the context of the wider fostering assessment.

Polyamorous fostering is currently uncommon, and the sector is potentially missing out on a group of people who have much to offer, particularly since polyamorous families bring strengths that might not always be evident with single or monogamous foster carers. Hopefully we will see a growth in polyamorous fostering, and this practice note can be updated with the benefit of greater evidence and experience.

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Note on the author

Paul Adams is an independent social work practitioner, consultant, and trainer with an expertise in fostering.

www.pauladamsfostering.uk

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