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## Encouraging esteem through enriched experiences: Compass Children's Services

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### Brief description

Compass Children's Services is an independent fostering agency. There has been a strong commitment to improving the education of children looked after within the service since 1998. Compass Complementary Education (CCE) has the explicit aim of providing education to any child or young person placed with Compass Children's Services who does not have a full-time education placement. Within CCE, the provision of experiential education is proving to be highly effective. Experiential educators are Compass foster carers with a particular skill or interest in education, trained and supported by the fostering agency to provide educational experiences and activities.

### Overview – the provider's message

'I look forward to the day when no child or young person needs to access experiential education, as this would mean all were attending full-time school. In the meantime, we have found an effective solution for children and young people looked after who do not have a school placement or have been excluded – experiential education.

Experiential education provides opportunities to encourage the self-esteem of children looked after and to develop self-confidence – promoting academic achievement and ability through a series of enhanced experiences. The learners not only have the opportunity to engage in positive experiences but crucially they build a portfolio of evidence, based around their experiences, which can provide evidence to support their reintegration into conventional schooling.'

*Andy Fraser, Head of Service (Education)*

### The good practice in detail

#### What is Compass Experiential Education?

It is well reported nationally that outcomes for children looked after are below those of their peers at all key stages in their education. Negative experiences and school histories are often barriers to them accessing learning. Many may have missed out on vital education and lack confidence in their ability to learn. Within CCE, the innovative use of trained foster carers (who deliver experiential education) is proving to be crucial in ensuring that each child and young person has the opportunity to achieve their potential.

The provision of experiential education is described by Andy Fraser, Head of Service (Education) as 'a bridge' into mainstream education for children and young people who may not have a school placement, perhaps because they have recently moved into the area or have been excluded from school. It aims to:

- provide additional, relevant and appropriate educational experiences and activities for children and young people who are not in full-time education
- improve self-esteem through enhanced experiences
- enable children and young people to reintegrate into full-time schooling successfully
- make best use of the skills of Compass carers.

### How is it delivered?

All 120 Compass foster carers receive training that includes a focus on their role and responsibility in ensuring that children achieve the best possible educational outcomes. Each is given an 'education toolkit', providing information on the education system, how to liaise with schools, the personal education plan (PEP) and helping with homework. Qualified teaching staff provide support to carers and children and young people if there are difficulties at school and attend almost all PEP reviews.

In addition to the training received by all the foster carers, some carers undertake extra training to become experiential educators. The experiential education programme is monitored by qualified teachers and delivered by a team of 45 experiential educators who are all working foster carers. Foster carers that are interested in this work, and have the required skill levels, receive additional training in experiential education; the course has recently been accredited by the Open College Network. Compass qualified teachers observe all educators during a probationary period to ensure that sessions are of good quality.

‘Experiential education sessions were some of my happiest times in care.’

Children and young people do not attend experiential education sessions with their own foster carers. Individual sessions take place in the experiential educator's home or out in the community – for example visiting museums, places of interest or the countryside. Following discussion with the child's foster carer and the Compass qualified teachers, the experiential educators produce individual lesson plans that are based around the child or young person's individual needs, abilities and interests. These are quality assured by the Head of Service (Education). Every session is evaluated by both the child and the educator in order to assess children's engagement and achievement and inform the development of the next session.

Experiential educators bring a wide range of skills to the experiences offered, such as knowledge of dinosaurs, Caribbean cookery, remedial reading and budgeting. Importantly they demonstrate a passionate commitment to improving outcomes for children looked after,

understand the value of education and pass this on to the children and young people. Planned sessions have included activities as diverse as rebuilding a bike, writing and performing a rap, teaching a child to swim, fishing and nail design. Other sessions follow programmes of work set by the school.

The educators are well placed to understand the issues and needs of the young people, as they are all trained and experienced foster carers themselves. They understand the need to be flexible in their delivery, according to the needs of the child. They take every opportunity to engage, stimulate and teach the children and young people through the experiences provided. One educator comments: 'You would be surprised how much maths you can fit in to setting up a fictitious café!'

By taking part in structured one-to-one activities, the children and young people have the opportunity to learn in ways that conventional schools are not always able to provide. An educator explains: 'We have time to ignore the fidgeting and lack of eye contact.' There is a strong emphasis on building trust, thereby helping children to feel safe and secure which is a pre-requisite for future learning. Challenging young people often achieve well in these nurturing, supportive and structured environments.

## Outcomes for the children and young people

- Compass data show that educational outcomes for children and young people placed with Compass carers are better than found nationally. 2012 results show that 40% of children achieved five good GCSEs, which is better than found across England as a whole.
- For the large majority of children in full-time schooling attendance rates are good, with attendance figures of 95% overall in spring term 2013. Figures have been at this level or above for each term since spring 2011.
- Children's own evaluations of the experiential education sessions show that not only do they enjoy the experiences provided but take pride in what they have achieved. 'I am doing fractions... if my teacher could see me now!' exclaimed one young person. Their involvement in the evaluation and planning of the sessions means that they are full contributors to developing their own learning.
- Since January 2010, 34 children have benefited from Compass experiential education sessions and the very large majority are reintegrated into mainstream schooling. Accessible, enjoyable and timely provision of educational experiences often provides an effective bridge until the child can get back into the classroom.
- Following children's engagement with experiential education, professionals including social workers and teachers report improvements in a range of areas such as concentration and communication skills and reduced absconding. For example, one child was deeply terrified by an experience at school. The skilful work of the experiential educator, which included support in the classroom on reintegration to school, has contributed to the young person now attending full time, without support, and achieving well.
- The children and young people have the opportunity to engage with another positive adult role model, who is not their social worker, foster carer or teacher. One

‘I am doing fractions... if my teacher could see me now!’

experiential educator was sent a message that simply read the 'Experiential education sessions were some of my happiest times in care'. The 'space' provided by the sessions can help to avoid both placement breakdown and permanent exclusion.

## Outcomes for foster carers

Foster carers who are trained as experiential educators also experience some perhaps unexpected benefits.

- They are able to use their learning on how to engage the children and young people with their own children.
- They reflect more on their role as foster carer and educator and evaluate their own provision carefully.
- They get a great deal of satisfaction from seeing children make progress and return to school. As one educator said 'It is fulfilling to build something with trust and belief'.
- They see possibilities for education everywhere and, through encouraging children and young people, also develop their own 'thirst for learning'.
- They enjoy being able to help other foster carers and understand that the provision of experiential education can be pivotal to maintaining secure home placements.
- Compass report that the opportunity to develop this aspect of their work has a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. One carer said that 'the strong focus on the importance of education within Compass Children's Services had a direct impact on choosing to foster with Compass rather the local authority'.

## Provider background

[Compass Children's Services](#) is an independent fostering agency in Loughborough operated by a private company. It provides short-term, long-term and respite foster placements across the Midlands and has recently expanded into other parts of the country under the banner of The Compass Community. Compass Children's Services, Loughborough was [last inspected in July 2012](#) and was judged outstanding in all aspects.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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