

# Information for parents of children in foster care

## Note on terminology used:

**Parental responsibility** – all the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority, which by law a parent has in relation to a child and his property.

**Accommodated** – when young people are looked after by the local authority and in foster or residential care with the agreement of their parents.

**Care Order** – a court order that means that parental responsibility for a child is Shared by the parent and by the local authority. The local authority can only override a parent's exercise of their parental responsibility if it is necessary to do so in order to safeguard or promote the child's welfare.

**Delegated authority** – where a person with parental responsibility gives Permission, to another person to do or agree something on their behalf in relation to a particular child.

## Your feelings

Whatever the reasons for your child needing to live with foster carers, you may be feeling upset, possibly angry and confused, and maybe lonely, too.

Some parents who have been through this say that having their child cared for by someone else is one of the most difficult things they have had to face, even if it's for a relatively short time.

They also say that, because they are upset, it is often hard to take in what they are told about how foster care works.

This information sheet has been written to help you feel more confident about asking questions about foster care. It may also help you to join in the discussions that take place about how your child will be cared for while he or she is living in foster care and who – between you, the social workers and the foster carers – can decide what, and agree what, for your child on a day-to-day basis.

## What are foster carers and what do they do?

Foster carers are ordinary people doing the very important job of caring for other people's children.

Fostering families come in different shapes and sizes, just like families everywhere. Some foster only one child; some care for foster brothers and sisters and small groups of children.

They may foster children for short periods – helping them to return home, perhaps – or for very long periods, if a young person needs to stay until they are old enough to leave and live independently.

## Some other things you might like to know about foster carers are:

- Foster carers have to be approved by a fostering service provider before they can foster.
- The backgrounds of all foster carers, and any other adult in their household, are carefully looked at when they apply to foster, to ensure that they are the right people to care for children.
- Foster carers are approved and supported by local authorities or by voluntary or independent agencies. If local authorities have not got a suitable foster home for a child, they will often place him or her with a foster carer from another service. All fostering services have to comply with the same regulations and requirements, so this is not something to worry about.
- Foster carers receive training before and after they are approved to foster by their fostering service.
- Foster carers are supervised by their own social worker – a different social worker to the one responsible for your child.
- All foster carers receive an allowance that covers the cost of caring for the children they care for. Many foster carers also receive a fee to reward them for the skills, time, experience, etc, that they bring to their role. Without these payments, they would not be able to foster as, like any other family, they would have to find paid employment elsewhere.

## What happens when my child goes to stay with foster carers?

### How does it work?

- The social workers have to make sure that the foster home is suitable for your child before he or she goes there.
- Before, or very soon after, your child goes to stay with the foster carers, there has to be a meeting – a **Placement Planning Meeting**.
- This is an important meeting because it brings together the social worker and the foster carers, the parents (if that is possible) and the child (if old enough).
- The aim of the meeting is to ensure that everyone meets each other, everyone is clear about why the child needs a foster home and everyone knows about the **Care Plan** for your child.
- The Care Plan is important because it helps everyone involved to develop a shared understanding of what needs to happen to meet your child's needs.
- The social worker's job at this meeting is to make sure that the foster carers have as much information as possible to care for your child – about family, health, education, routines, activities, likes and dislikes. You are probably the person who knows your child best and you can do a great deal to help your child by sharing information with the social workers and the foster carers.
- As the parent, you need information, too. You need to feel reassured about the care your child will receive. Even in very unusual situations when parents can't be told where their child is living, they are still entitled to information about the sort of foster family their child is going to stay with – what they do, what sort of area they live in, what their home is like, etc – so they can think about their child there.

- The Placement Planning Meeting, the initial Care Planning Meeting and the Review meetings that come later are also important for sorting out arrangements for contact and how parents, social workers and the foster carers will work together to make sure the child's needs are met in the foster home. It is important that as much as possible is planned in advance to avoid delays and misunderstandings.

## How do I know who makes decisions and who does what when my child is in foster care?

- Parents have Parental Responsibility (PR).
- If there is a Care Order, the local authority shares PR with the parent. It is important that social workers work with the child's parents and that the parents are consulted about the care their child receives and their wishes taken into account.
- Foster carers do not have PR – this means that any authority to make certain decisions is delegated to them by people who do have PR.
- The Placement Planning Meeting is for discussing what decisions and tasks foster carers undertake on your behalf or on the local authority's behalf.
- Whether your child is on a Care Order or looked after with your agreement (which is called accommodated), it is important that you have opportunities to meet the foster carers and to play a part in this discussion. Even if – for some reason – you cannot attend the Placement Planning meeting, you need to be fully involved so that you understand what is happening and can have your say about how things are done for your child.
- The most important thing is that your child gets the care he or she needs and there is a minimum of delay sorting out who can make particular decisions about your child, or give particular consents.
- Children and young people in foster care say they feel embarrassed and upset if there are delays in agreeing things, or if getting consents and agreements from parents and social workers make them stand out from other children. That is why parents, foster carers and social workers all have a responsibility to agree as much as possible in advance, to make sure things work well for the child.
- If you give prior permission – or if the local authority delegates authority – to foster carers to consent to things like emergency or routine medical treatment, school trips, overnight stays or hair cuts (i.e. the everyday decisions that all children need); this will enable the foster carer to make the best arrangements possible for your child.
- However, responsibilities work both ways. In order for you to feel comfortable with foster carers taking decisions that you or the social workers have agreed in advance, you are entitled to receive good reliable information – from the foster carer or the social worker – about what has been decided, and when. You also need to be reassured that you will be consulted about the other things that arise.
- Of course all this will depend on your child's age and your situation.

## Five things that all parents need to know about delegated authority and consents

- 1** You are entitled to help and support to understand and play your essential part in your child's life when he or she is in foster care.
- 2** The relationship between you and your child's foster carer is important. It is better for your child if you can talk together and agree things. Whenever possible you should meet the foster carer at placement planning meetings and reviews and at times during your child's stay – and not just when contact takes place.
- 3** You need to be clear about the arrangements for **authority and consents** in relation to your child – what you will do, what the social workers will do, and what the foster carers are authorised to do
- 4** If children are going to stay with foster carers until they are old enough to live independently, it is usually helpful and feels more normal for them to have foster carers who can take more day-to-day decisions for them. This ensures that things can be sorted easily and quickly for them and stops them feeling different from their friends. It is not about excluding you.
- 5** As your child gets older, he or she should be helped and encouraged to take more responsibility and make more decisions in his or her life as part of becoming more grown up. It may not be comfortable for parents – or for foster carers – but sometimes the young person's opinion will count most when decisions are made.

## Six top tips for parents

- 1** Do speak to the social worker and foster carer/s about the details of your child's day-to-day care, routines and preferences, such as their health, religious practices and education. You could write these down for the foster carer.
- 2** Make sure you are contactable – social workers or foster carers may need to consult you or advise you of something at short notice, so let them know of any change of address or telephone number.
- 3** Don't be afraid to ask questions – about your rights, about foster care and about your child's foster carers.
- 4** Do attend meetings.
- 5** Ask if the local authority has any additional services or sources of support for parents of children in foster care.
- 6** All fostering services have to produce a Statement of Purpose and a Children's Guide about how the service is run and how it works. Ask to see these if you want to find out more about foster care.

## Independent help and support for parents

Family Rights Group confidential telephone advice line can be contacted on **0808 801 0366**.

There is no charge for mobile and landline callers.