

Fosterline Wales Factsheet

The mental health of looked after children

Introduction

Mental health is important for all children and young people. Children who are looked after are five times more likely, than other children, to experience mental health problems and mental illness. Half have a clinically diagnosable disorder. They are far more likely to feel less happy and less satisfied with life. Without appropriate and timely support and treatment, poor mental wellbeing can have a significant impact on future life experiences

Foster carers play a vital role in supporting or improving their mental health. This includes supporting a child to access and use mental health services, and learning how best to support the child themselves.

What is mental health?

Mental wellbeing can be defined as children and young people's happiness, life satisfaction and positive functioning. So the goal of any mental health support or treatment is to promote mental wellbeing. As with physical health, mental health can sometimes be improved by changes to lifestyle or ways of thinking, sometimes people need to see a GP or more specialist input, including inpatient treatment, and sometimes people need medication for the short or long term.

Mental health depends on:

- the child themselves – their physical health, emotional maturity and resilience
- the family environment – this applies both to their time before joining your family, and the environment you provide
- the learning environment – academic engagement, relationships with teachers and other people
- the community – community safety, community deprivation.

Being aware of this can help you think of the best ways you can support the child's mental health.

Sometimes it is clear that a child has a serious mental health problem. At other times, it may be difficult to distinguish between normal teenage behaviour and the start of a mental health problem.

Supporting a child's mental wellbeing

As a foster carer, you probably spend more time with the child than any other adult. As such, you have a valuable role in supporting their mental wellbeing. This means you need to be aware of:

- Risk factors. What in the child's past or current experience might put them at risk of developing mental health problems, or existing problems becoming worse?
- Protective factors. How can you support a child to feel safe, know they are valued, make sense of their past, build healthy relationships and have positive experiences in your family, your community and in education? Talk about emotions, and help children learn to talk about their own.
- Resilience. Some children have the skills to overcome risk factors or lack of protective factors. This is called resilience. The factsheet on resilience will help you support a child to develop this.

Life story work is essential. Liaise with the child's social worker about what they will do, and what they want you to do, about helping the child make sense of their past and possible future.

Knowing you have a voice and your views are treated with respect makes a big difference to mental wellbeing. Many fostered children rate this as the most important factor in improving their wellbeing.

The resources section lists a few of the sources of information and support you can access or the child can access for themselves.

Mental health and wellbeing: the challenges

Some children in care may have moved frequently between different foster and residential placements, or they may be placed far from their home. This can mean details of their medical history are difficult to find, while also compounding their social isolation and loss of support networks.

In addition to this, when a child is in public care the health-related responsibilities of their parents are delegated to a wide number of professionals – not only to their foster carers, but also to social workers, specialist nurses, paediatricians, youth services and teachers, along with many others.

Co-ordinating this activity between a public authority and the NHS can be a complex task for anyone. However, foster carers will need to meet these challenges in order to assess, address and promote the health and wellbeing of children and young people in their care.

Navigating mental health services

If a child is using mental health services when they come to you, their needs, services they currently use, and what is expected of you, should be written in their care and support plan, the placement agreement and their school Individual Education Plan.

If you identify that they need additional support or have undiagnosed mental health problems, liaise with the child's social worker. The most common first steps towards mental health services is via the school counselling service, the GP or the person responsible for the health of looked after children.

The child may be referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service team (CAMHS) for an assessment. Each health board offers different services through CAMHS. You can find local services from the health board's website.

In a crisis situation, a child may be first seen in the Emergency Department of the hospital and then referred to an appropriate service.

Availability of mental health services in Wales, and waiting times for those available, is patchy. It is important that you, the child's social worker and your social worker, know how to access information about different mental health problems and mental illnesses, as you may need to provide the best support you can while waiting for an appropriate service. Starting suggestions are in resources.

Fostering a child with a serious mental health problem or mental illness

Fostering a child with a serious mental health problem or mental illness is highly challenging. It can be emotionally and physically draining. It requires excellent communication and team working from a number of professionals, not just yourself.

It is vitally important to:

- be informed. Find out as much as you can. Make use of any peer support groups or forums.
- keep accurate records. This helps those treating the child and makes it easier for you to spot patterns of illness or behaviour.
- keep track of all those who are treating, caring for and supporting the child. You may be the only person who has an overview of the whole of the child's life, so tracking other people's involvement is important.
- prioritise self care. It is easy but dangerous to neglect your own needs while caring for someone who has high levels of need. Make time for yourself. Be aware if your stress levels are rising and ask for help and/or respite from your local authority or agency.
- have crisis and contingency plans, including contact names and numbers. If you do not have such plans, talk with your social worker and the child's social worker about drawing plans up with mental health services.

Leaving care

Leaving care can present care leavers with new challenges to their emotional and mental health. Many feel isolated and often struggle with living alone. The stresses of running a home, managing a budget, renewed family contact, as well as coming to terms with being looked after, can take its toll. The rapid withdrawal of social services support will also add to the pressure.

Foster carers can help by maintaining relationships and offering emotional support – you can provide a trusting relationship and consistency. You can also act as an advocate to ensure that the pathway plan is an effective tool to assess, act upon and monitor wellbeing.

Personal advisers and particularly the pathway plan have a role in ensuring the needs of care leavers, with mental health difficulties, are addressed with a focus on the transition between child and adult mental health services, and across local authorities or NHS boundaries. Those leaving care, particularly those with mental health difficulties, require a higher level of support and provision during this time. Encourage your young person to reach out to specialist mental health advice and support within the leaving care team.

Further Resources

To read:

The Fostering Network in Wales has produced some consultation research with foster carers regarding the mental health of looked after children. For a copy of this report please email maria.boffey@fostering.net

Information, advice and support for adults and young people themselves about young people's mental health, including mental illnesses <https://youngminds.org.uk>
The Better with Books scheme provides books for children and young people on topics that may affect their mental health
<http://gov.wales/topics/health/nhswales/mental-health-services/policy/child-mental/books/?lang=en>

NSPCC's resources <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-protection-system/children-in-care/emotional-wellbeing-of-children-in-care>

Social Care Institute of Excellence have a report on the mental health of looked after children written for adults <https://www.scie.org.uk/children/care/mental-health/report> and a website for children and young people themselves <https://www.scie.org.uk/young-people/cc/>

Helpful organisations and websites:

Dewis is a web resource for the whole of Wales. You can use it to check which services are available locally.

Young people aged 11-25 can contact Meic <https://www.meiccymru.org/> or Rethink <https://www.rethink.org/living-with-mental-illness/young-people>

Foster carers and young people can get information and support around suicide prevention from <https://www.papyrus-uk.org/>

Foster carers and young people can contact the Samaritans. The English language helpline is available 24/7 on 116 123; the Welsh language helpline is available 7pm-11pm, 7 days a week, on 08081640123. You can email jo@samaritans.org. You can call into a local office. The office locator link is <https://www.samaritans.org/branches>

Time to Change challenge the stigma around mental health <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/about-us/what-are-we-doing/children-and-young-people>

How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us or write to us at:

Fosterlinewales@fostering.net

The Fostering Network Wales

1 Caspian Point, Pierhead Street

Cardiff Bay CF10 4DQ

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information contact our learning and development manager, Sarah Mobedji at <http://sarah.mobedji@fostering.net>.

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

Contact

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:

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