Information about contact for parents of children in foster care

Your feelings

Whatever the reasons for your child needing to live with foster carers, you are likely to have strong feelings about it. You may be feeling upset, angry, confused or helpless and maybe lonely too.

Parents who have had this experience 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 all the arrangements, including arrangements for seeing your child and keeping in touch with them in other ways - ’contact’. Contact with family members and friends is a very important part of looking after a child and can have a significant impact on both your experience and your child’s experience of their time in care. It will help your child to settle with their foster carers if they are able to have good quality time with you. Getting the contact right for your child is very important.

What are foster carers and what do they do?

Parents often say that they don’t know very much about foster care. 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 carers have been doing this job for a very long time, others are newer to fostering. Some foster only one child, some care for foster brothers and sisters or 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 live independently. There are laws and regulations about how foster carers are assessed and supported and all fostering services have to abide by these.

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

- The backgrounds of all foster carers and any other adult in their households are carefully checked when they apply and they have to be recommended by a fostering panel before they can foster.
- Foster carers are approved and supported by local authorities or by independent fostering providers. If local authorities have not got a suitable foster home for a child, they will often place the child with a foster carer from another service. All fostering services have to comply with the same regulations and requirements.
- 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. (You may hear people call them a ‘supervising social worker’, or ‘link worker’ depending on your area).
- All foster carers receive an allowance that covers the cost of looking after children they care for. Many foster carers also receive a fee. Without these payments, they would not be able to foster.

What happens when my child goes to stay with foster carers—how does it work?

Whether your child needs a foster carer with your agreement or because a court decided that it is necessary, 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 social workers, foster carers, you as parents (if that is possible) and your child if they are old enough. The aim of the meeting is to ensure that everyone meets each other, everyone is clear about why your child needs a foster home and everyone knows about the Care Plan for your child.

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. The knowledge that you have is very important. You can do a great deal to help your child by sharing information with your child’s social workers and foster carers.

You need information too. You need to feel reassured about the care your child will receive. (Even in very unusual situations when you can’t be told where your child is living, you are still entitled to information about the sort of foster family your child is going to stay with - what they do, what sort of area it is, what their home is like - so that you can think about your child there).

The Placement Planning Meeting and the Review meetings that come later are also important for sorting out how parents, social workers and foster carers will work together to make sure your child’s needs are met in their foster home. Contact is always discussed in these meetings. It is important that as many things as possible are planned in advance to avoid delays and misunderstandings for everyone.
How do I know who makes decisions and who does what when my child is in foster care?

- Decisions are made by parents who have ‘Parental Responsibility’ (PR) – see explanation on last page.
- If there is a Care Order the local authority shares PR with you. The social workers have more authority to decide things than if a child is accommodated with your agreement but parents still have the right to be consulted and informed about the care their child receives.
- Foster carers do not have PR - this means their responsibilities are delegated to them. Realistically though, they will need to make many day-to-day decisions.

The Placement Planning Meeting is for discussing what decisions and tasks foster carers undertake on your behalf or on the local authority’s behalf. It should also consider all aspects of contact with you, your child’s wider family and friends. You should be clear about what contact you will be having with your child, where this will take place and any help you will be given with the contact arrangements. If this is part of a court process, it should be made clear to you what the purpose of the contact is - for example, whether it is part of the assessment process and whether a report be written for court about how well you maintained contact and your relationship with your child.

It is important that you have opportunities to meet your children’s foster carers and to play a part in discussions about contact. Even if you are not able to attend the Placement Planning meeting, you need to be fully involved - to understand what is happening and to have your say about arrangements.

If your child is subject to legal proceedings, a court decides how much contact should take place. There may be less contact if the long-term plan is that your child remains in foster care, or if the plan is that they will be adopted. This may be difficult for you and your child to accept. If you are in this situation, find out what help and support is available for you so that the contact that you do have is as worthwhile as possible for you and your child.

The most important thing is that your child gets the care he or she needs and that contact arrangements, consents and decisions are sorted out quickly.

Children and young people in foster care have a lot to say about contact. They say that:

- They value contact with their family and friends
- They want to feel free to enjoy both aspects of their lives and to see positive relationships between their family and their foster carer. They don’t want to feel pressurized to choose between their family and their foster carers
- They want to be able to have easy and natural contact with their family, but not to lose out on other areas of their lives (such as playing football with the local team, or going to a sleepover with their mates).

If these things happen, children can benefit from the care they need in their foster home and from the contact they have with their families. This will help them to do well if they stay in foster care or, if the plan is for them to return home, then it will make that plan easier to achieve.

The age of your child is clearly an important consideration in all of this discussion - the older they are the more their views will be taken into account. It may be that they choose to see less of you because they have other activities they wish to be involved in. This is not because they think any less of you, but because they are growing up and a natural part of growing up is the
wish to make their own decisions and spend time with their friends. Parents of older children in foster care have to 'let go' a little just as they would if their children were with them at home.

Whatever the plan for your child, positive contact with family and friends is very important to their future. It will help everyone if you can work with your child’s foster carer and social worker to achieve this. In the same way, you can expect them to work with you, to appreciate the situation you are in and to treat you with respect.

Four things that all parents need to know

● 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.
● 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.
● You need to be clear about the arrangements for consents and responsibilities in relation to your child- what you will do, what social workers will do, what foster carers will do.
● You need to be clear what the contact plan is, what you need to do as part of the plan and what you can expect other people to do.

Some useful explanations

Care Plan
All children cared for by the local authority must have a plan that looks at all aspects of their care including contact. The Placement Plan forms an important part of the Care Plan. The Care Plan should enable you to have a better understanding of why certain decisions are made about your child.

Parental Responsibility
Having parental responsibility means assuming all the 'rights, duties, powers responsibilities and authority' that a parent of a child has through law. A mother always has these rights unless the child has been adopted, but a father may have to acquire them through legal means if he was not married when the child was born.

Sources of help and support
Family Rights Group confidential advice line. No charge for mobile and landline callers. 0808 801 0366