

**EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES
FAMILY PLACEMENT SERVICE**

SAFE CARING POLICY AND PRACTICE GUIDANCE

Effective from: 1 st June 2009	Author: Julia Brown, February 2008 Reviewed by: Tina Ryan, May 2009
Review date: 1 st June 2011	Approved by: CFMT

Policy Aim:

To outline for children, parents, foster carers and social workers, Slough's policy on safe caring in foster homes.

To ensure that all foster homes have strategies in place to meet the following objectives:

- To keep children safe from abuse from adults
- To keep children in the foster home safe from abuse by other children in the household
- To keep members of the foster family safe from false allegations of abuse

Legislation, Central Government and other External Documents:

Acts:

The Children Act 1989 and associated regulations and guidance
The Data Protection Act 1998
The Protection of Children Act 1999
The Adoption and Children Act 2002
The Children Act 2004

Regulations:

Arrangements for Placement of Children (General) Regulations 1991
Fostering Services Regulations 2002
Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005
Special Guardianship Regulations 2005

Standards:

UK National Standards of Foster Care, 1999
Code of Practice on recruitment, assessment, approval, training, management and support of foster carers 1999
National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2002
Children's Workforce Development Council Induction Standards 2006

Slough Borough Council Education and Children's Services Department References:

Slough Borough Council Fostering Service Statement of Purpose

"Safe caring should not prevent children and young people receiving the care they need. Carers need to find ways of showing care that are not open to misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Experienced carers say that you have to change the way you do things at home and that after a while this just becomes normal and does not stop you leading ordinary lives". (Taken from 'Safe Caring', first published by National Foster Care Association [now Fostering Network] 1994).

Specific Regulatory Requirement:

Standard 9.3 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services requires safe caring guidelines to be provided, based on a written policy, for each foster home, in consultation with the carer and everyone else in the household. These guidelines must be cleared with each child's social worker and be explained clearly and appropriately to the child.

Policy

Safe caring guidelines must be provided and kept up-to-date for each foster home.

Assessing social workers should ensure that guidelines are produced, based on this policy, during the assessment process. Social workers should ensure that all members of the household are involved in this process and agreement is reached on the final guidelines.

This process should also be used as part of the preparation of applicants. It will present both the worker and the applicants with opportunities to reflect on their attitude to issues of abuse and how prepared they are to take on board the implications of abuse for both their household and any child they may foster.

A copy of each carer's guidelines should be retained by their supervising social worker on the carer's file and these should be discussed with the child's social worker at the point of referral. Consideration will need to be given at this stage to the needs of the child and the implication of the guidelines. In some cases it may be apparent that the proposed match is not suitable and an alternative placement should be identified.

The guidelines should be shared with the child, in an age-appropriate way, as early as possible in the placement. Ideally this will be prior to or at the point of placement but in all cases must be done no later than the placement agreement meeting. In some cases the guidelines may need to be adjusted because of the specific needs or background of the child and the placement agreement meeting should be used as the opportunity to agree any required changes.

The Need for Safe Caring Guidelines

All families have strategies for day-to-day living. These will vary from family to family and will be more or less formal depending on the circumstances and preferences of each family. In most families, such strategies are unwritten and frequently unspoken. Children learn how the family operates as part of their day to day development and generally accept this as the 'norm' as they have limited experience of anything else.

Carers need to be aware of the strategies in operation in their household for three reasons:

Firstly, they need to consider the impact on the way the family functions of a child joining the household. Adjustments are likely to be needed and carers need to think about the ways of minimising the disruption to family routines.

Secondly, carers need to consider the implications of their existing strategies for children joining the household. Such children will usually already have experience of family life and the strategies used in their own home may be very different than those in operation in the foster home. Some will come from chaotic households where there are few boundaries and adjusting to a more formal structure could be difficult. Others will come from a very rigid and structured background where they have had little control over their own lives and adjusting to new found freedoms may be problematic.

Thirdly, carers will need to identify behaviour or practices within their own household that might be acceptable to them, but will increase risk in a foster home. Some perfectly acceptable routines in families could put both children and carers at risk in foster homes.

Review of Guidelines

Safe caring guidelines will need to be revised as the circumstances of the household change.

This should be done immediately if there are significant changes such as someone joining the household or the carers move house. In such cases the revised guidelines will need to be cleared with the social worker of any child in placement.

The guidelines should also be considered at the point of every child's review or placement agreement review to ensure they remain up to date and appropriate.

Developing Safe Caring Guidelines

All members of the household should be involved in agreeing guidelines, in particular children of the household and if applicable the secondary/ other carer(s).

Whilst foster care has changed dramatically over recent years, there is still a tendency in couples for one to be seen as the primary carer and one as the secondary carer and the secondary carer is frequently male.

Often the secondary carer may not be directly involved in planning meetings or reviews for individual children. This means that they might not have up to date information or be aware of all the issues that need to be considered to ensure safe caring for a particular child.

Similar issues will apply to children/ other members of the household, but for men there are additional considerations. Although children are abused by women or other children, the majority of abusers are heterosexual men and most allegations are made against male carers. This does not mean that men should pass all responsibility for fostering to female partners, but rather that men need to be fully involved in working out how to provide care safely.

Developing safe caring guidelines should not mean changing everything that carers do. It is about considering which elements of the way the household operates might put children or household members at risk. Once these elements are identified, carers need to develop strategies that minimise this risk.

It is neither desirable nor the aim of this policy for carers to produce a complicated, rigid set of rules for their household. Guidelines do need to be written down so that children joining the household, their parents and social workers understand the way the household operates. These should be as brief as possible however and only include those elements that will enhance safe caring.

Practice Guidance on Elements of Safe Caring Guidelines

Carers and social workers will need to consider a wide range of issues when developing safe caring guidelines. The following are some of these and how they may be addressed. However, carers and social workers should remember that this list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

The use of names

Carers should avoid the use of the terms 'mummy' or 'daddy'. They are not the child's birth parents and the use of these terms is likely to confuse the child and can also antagonise or alienate parents. The use of first names, possibly preceded by aunty and uncle is a preferable option.

The use of language

Most families have words and terms they use to describe parts of the body or bodily functions such as going to the toilet. Carers need to consider the words they use and their potential meaning for foster children. They also need to establish the terms the child uses as soon as possible to avoid any distress to a child who might be finding it difficult to express their needs.

Clothing

No member of the household should walk around in underwear or nightwear and carers should make sure that all members of the household and fostered children have a dressing gown and slippers as well as appropriate nightwear.

Touching

The need for affection and reassurance is a basic human need that is of particular importance to children's development. Unfortunately the need to balance this with the risk to fostered children and carers of affection being misinterpreted makes this a difficult area for carers. While spontaneous hugs and kisses to our own children fulfils this basic need and serves to strengthen the bond between adult and child, it may mean something very different to the fostered child.

The way carers demonstrate affection to a fostered child may therefore be different from the way they show it to others in the family, and this difference will need to be managed. Carers may need to talk to their own children about how affection is expressed when fostered children are around. The safest rule is that no one in the household touches another person's body without that person's permission. Children should generally be asked first if they want a hug, and they need to be taught that it is perfectly acceptable to say no.

Games that involve physical contact such as tickling or play- fighting should be avoided, as they can over-stimulate children and involve uncontrolled touching that can be misinterpreted.

Bathing

Washing and bathtimes are occasions when a child can feel very vulnerable because they have to remove their clothing. It is also a setting where a child may have been sexually abused in the past. Carers in a partnership should discuss with each other and the child's social worker who is the most appropriate person to give the child a feeling of safety and confidence in the bathroom. It is not a task that should be given to the carer's older children.

Children who are able to bathe themselves should be encouraged to do so and be given privacy in the bathroom.

For younger children or other children who have needs that mean they require help in bathing, it is preferable for a female carer to bathe them where this is possible, and male carers should not be left alone to bathe or dress children unless this cannot be avoided. If gender-based decisions cannot be made, thoughtful and sensible strategies should be put in place to reduce anxiety and potential misinterpretation. Encouragement should be given for children to be as independent as possible in terms of washing their own bodies.

Doors can be left unlocked and left ajar. Conversations can take place with someone outside the bathroom so the child knows there is someone else around.

Bedtime

This calls for the same kinds of considerations as bathtime, for the same reasons. Carers should resist entreaties to get into, or lie on, the child's bed. A chair that can be pulled close is the solution to chats that may be necessary at night. Doors should be left open.

Children's bedrooms

While sharing of bedrooms is acceptable, each child must have their own bed and space for some privacy (Standard 6.4).

If a child has been abused or has abused another child, then their needs and the needs of all other children will be assessed and the outcome of this assessment recorded before any decision is made to allow the sharing of bedrooms (Standard 6.5).

Where children are to share bedrooms, consideration needs to be given to how each child is afforded some privacy, both for their possessions and their need for personal space.

Consideration needs to be given as to when others may enter the bedroom. Except in an emergency, people should be expected to ask permission before entering the room and older children should be given increasing control over who goes into their room.

Where someone does go into a child's room, whether they are another child or an adult, the door should always be kept open.

Careful consideration is needed before the use of sending a child to their room as a sanction as for some children this will trigger memories of prior abuse.

It is preferable for a female carer or both a male and female carer to be involved in putting a child to bed and the bedroom door should be kept open.

Adult's bedrooms

Many parents allow their own children to share their bed for a variety of reasons – for play, to read or to be comforted. While fostered children have the same needs, the sharing of carers' beds should be avoided. For abused children, such practices may again trigger memories of prior abuse and for any child the carer will risk leaving themselves open to allegations of abuse.

Carers therefore need to find other ways of providing such times of warmth and affection outside of the bedroom. This might be for example by reading together on the sofa.

If a child is unwell and in need of comfort and supervision throughout the night, the carer may need to stay with the child in their bedroom, sleep nearby, or the child may need to sleep on the sofa with the carer in an armchair.

Playing

Consideration is needed as to where in the house children may play unsupervised.

Carers should ensure that children are kept within earshot and checked on when they go quiet. Children should not normally be allowed to play with other children behind closed doors, although carers will need to balance the need for safety against the need for privacy for older children.

Where children wish to play outside the house, alone or with others, the child's physical safety will need to be considered as well as the potential risks the child may present to others.

The fostered child's greater susceptibility to bullying or being targeted by a potential abuser will also need to be considered.

Transport

Carers need to be mindful of the legislation regarding children and car seats. All children up to 135 cms tall (around 4' 5") or the age of 12, whichever comes first, in the front or rear seats of cars, vans and other goods vehicles must travel in the correct child restraint for their weights with very few exceptions. (See Further Information section at the end of this document for more details.)

Carers should also consider emotional, as well as physical, safety and how they can facilitate this, bearing in mind that car journeys can be challenging in many ways: the child is in a confined space from which there is no easy escape; the driver is in close proximity and in a powerful position; the child may have been taken by car to settings where they were abused.

Carers will need to consider the appropriateness of transporting children alone in a car, particularly if the child is known to have been abused. Where possible, this should be avoided, especially for men. If the carer has to travel alone with a child, then the child should sit in the back of the car.

Baby-sitters and alternative carers

As for any child, there will be times when fostered children need to be cared for by baby-sitters or other carers while the foster carer is out.

Again, ideally two people should be used to baby-sit or provide alternative care. Supervising social workers should ensure that a Criminal Records Bureau check is sought for regular alternative carers. The babysitter must also have sufficient awareness of safe caring considerations, as well as the authority and experience to deal with the children confidently.

Fostered children should not be left alone in the sole charge of a carer's own child, however willing they are, unless this is specifically cleared with the child's social worker.

Sleepovers

The balance to be struck is between safety and giving children as normal an experience as possible. The child's social worker or carer's supervising social worker must be consulted before a child in foster care can stay somewhere else overnight. Slough Borough Council follows government guidance on this matter, whereby the carer's assessment and knowledge of the family with whom the child wishes to stay, and the detailed arrangements of the sleepover is crucial.

There is a specific 'Staying Over Policy and Procedure' available in the foster carer handbook.

Safe caring outside the home

In respect of older children, there will be times when they will be outside the home when not under the direct supervision of the foster carer, e.g. going to and from school, short trips to the local shops, visiting friends locally, etc. Carers will need to make a judgement about when the young person is ready to be outside the home for short periods unsupervised and prepare them for this. Agreement will need to be reached with the young person about where they are going, how long for, who with and when they are expected to return.

In the event that a young person does not return, following a period outside the home unsupervised, the procedure to be followed is stated in the "Missing from Care" policy in the handbook.

Photographs and Videos

Carers need to be sensitive to the feelings of children and their parents in this area. Many children and adults will object to having their image recorded on film for religious or cultural reasons and their rights should be respected. (Note: Where it is likely that a photograph of the child will enter the public domain e.g. foster carers' outing featured in the local paper, it is essential to obtain the permission of the parents/holders of parental responsibility.)

In some cases the use of photographs and/or videos/DVD's will be an important part of the work being undertaken with the child, for example to help prepare an advertisement for a permanent family or as part of life-story work.

In all cases the carer should discuss the taking of photographs and videos/DVD's with the child's social worker before doing so. Cameras or camcorders may have been part of past abuse. The permission of the child should also be sought and they should have copies, perhaps for their ongoing life story work or book. The carer should ensure the child knows who else will see the images and why. No child should be photographed or filmed in the bath, in their underwear or undressed.

Photos and videos can be important elements in contact arrangements. They need careful consideration and decisions on a case-by-case basis as they may have implications for the security of the placement and the child's feeling of safety.

Contact

Contact with birth families and others who are significant to the child is of major importance to children in Local Authority care.

There will be occasions when children have contact with people who are known to have abused them and at other times they may have contact with abusers where neither the carer nor the social worker is aware that prior abuse has taken place.

Given that contact may take place in the foster home, carers will need to devise strategies to manage this in a sensitive manner, but also in a way that ensures the safety of the child.

Where the contact needs to be supervised, the arrangements for this should be agreed in advance with the child's social worker and the carer should ensure that they are able to dedicate all of their time to this task.

Where the contact does not need formal supervision, the carer should nevertheless ensure that they find ways to respect the need for some privacy while at the same time remaining aware of what is going on. Doors to rooms where contact is taking place should be kept open and the child should be kept within the earshot of the carer at all times.

The internet, social network sites and mobile phones

These facilities are now a fundamental part of everyday life and children are often more advanced in their technical knowledge and experience than the adults caring for them. The risks and dilemmas they present are very real, and carers need to encourage responsible and safer practices.

The Internet: As this is unregulated and unsupervised, access can expose children to material of a pornographic and violent nature in a few mouse clicks. Apart from the general harm this can cause, it can be deeply disturbing to those who have suffered abuse. To minimise risk, carers should:

- Site the computer in the family living room, where adults are always around. This is particularly important if a webcam is available, as predators are deterred by the sight of a normal household in the background
- Actively show an interest in what they are doing on the computer
- Agree a maximum amount of time per day allowed on the computer, which could be more at weekends
- Add password protection within the operating system so that unknown sites cannot be accessed accidentally
- Look together at their internet history files
- Use firewalls, security, and anti-virus protection, and understand the use of privacy settings so you know how much strangers can access (see Further Information)
- Block any inappropriate websites that the child may have accessed
- Ensure the child understands that 'stranger danger' applies to the internet. Advise the child never to give personal or identifying details, without special permission from their carer, and never arrange to meet anyone from a chat room, unless their carer is with them
- Advise the child never to respond to nasty or suggestive messages and tell their carer about them (see cyber bullying below)
- Discuss the issues with the child. Make sure they know they would be victims and never at fault if they become drawn into a situation with a stranger on the internet

Social networking sites: Social networking sites enable people using them to meet and socialise online by linking to other sites and therefore create an environment for the whole of their social network to easily exchange information and chat. People can also post comments and images of themselves or others online. This could compromise the safety of children or young people or the safety of those in their network as it leaves them open to contact from inappropriate people.

No foster carer registered with Slough Borough Council is permitted to accept or initiate contact in a personal capacity with a child or young person who is a client of the local authority via a social networking site e.g. by becoming their "friend". Foster carers are also expected to block their own profiles on any social networking sites so that personal details about themselves or their family or friends do not become available both currently and in the future to the children/young people they care for.

Foster carers are also not permitted to place any photographs or information about a child or young person in care in their own profiles on these sites.

In addition carers can minimise risk by:

- Ensuring that children and young people make their own profiles only accessible to people they know offline
- Encouraging children and young people to keep their personal information to a minimum
- Discussing with the child or young person the risks posed if they include a personal photograph of themselves or their friends in their profiles and advising against this.

Mobile phones: The ownership or personal use of a mobile phone is now commonplace, even for young children, despite the potential health hazards associated with heavy usage. It helps carers and children to stay in touch with each other, and children have easy contact with their friends and siblings. Difficulties can arise, particularly from the contact a mobile phone allows with people from whom the child needs protection. Dangers range from the intentional or unintentional undermining of placements and emotional abuse/ bullying of the child, through to the incurring of excessive costs and placing the child at risk of being mugged for their phone. Carers can minimise risks by:

- Ensuring the use of mobile phones is discussed at the time of placement, and that this issue forms part of the fostering agreement
- Deciding whether it is more appropriate that the mobile is pay-as-you-go, to monitor expenditure, or a contract that enables calls to be monitored more closely through itemised billing
- Avoiding Bluetooth or infrared phones for younger or more vulnerable children
- Turning off/ restricting access to the child's mobile phone after bedtime/ overnight
- Not permitting young children in foster care to have a mobile phone, for their own protection

Cyber bullying: New technologies provide an apparently anonymous method by which bullies can torment their victims at any time of the day or night. While the bullying may not be physical, the victim may receive an e-mail, chat or text messages or be the target of unfavourable websites or social networking profiles that make them feel embarrassed, upset, depressed or afraid. As stated above, carers need to ensure that children in their care can talk to them about any inappropriate messages, conversations or behaviours that they have been subjected to.

Race, Culture and Religion

The needs of both children and carers arising from race, religion and culture need careful consideration.

While this is frequently considered in terms of identity or the physical and dietary needs of children, there are also other issues relating to safe caring.

For example, some carers may say grace at mealtimes or pray as a family at other times. This may be of positive benefit to a child who shares the same religion, but potentially damaging to a child who has experienced ritualistic abuse.

Attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality will also need careful consideration.

Carers need to ensure that they consider their own attitude to these issues when drawing up their safe caring guidelines and discuss the individual needs of each child placed with the child's social worker.

Children with a Disability

Carers who are to foster children with a disability will need to give particular attention to ensuring the protection of such children.

The need for intimate personal care will have major implications for the child and the carer. The child may find it hard to distinguish this between other forms of touch and the carer may be more vulnerable to false allegations.

Communication problems may make it harder for a child to tell, and mobility problems will make it harder for children to run away or protect themselves from abuse.

Signs and symptoms of abuse may be missed and put down to the child's behaviour or medical conditions.

Children with a disability may have less knowledge and understanding about abuse and will find it more difficult to speak for themselves or make a complaint.

The Needs of Carers' own Children

Over recent years the needs of carers' own children has come to be increasingly acknowledged.

Fostering has a dramatic impact on all members of the household and the adjustments needed will need to be carefully considered before a family decide that fostering is right for them.

It will be important for carers to find ways to meet their own children's needs while keeping all children in the household safe. For example, while birth children may have to come to terms with the fact that it is no longer possible to share their parents beds, the carer should find ways of countering this loss by providing their own children with their own space and time to replace this loss.

Preparing for a Placement

While potential carers will need to prepare their household guidelines in advance of the experience of any placement, they will also need to consider these afresh (as will experienced carers) in advance of each individual placement.

Some of the issues carers will need to consider are:

- How will they explain to the child what is expected of them and other household members?
- Do they have all the information they need to care for the child safely?
- Is the child known to have been abused?
- Do the particular needs of the child mean that the usual household guidelines need to be revised?
- If so is this achievable and acceptable to all other members of the household?
- What are the most important household rules that must be adhered to and which are less significant?
- How will unacceptable behaviour be dealt with, whoever displays it?

Foster Carer Training

Fostering services are required to ensure that foster carer training covers caring for a child who has been abused; safe caring skills; managing behaviour and recognising signs of abuse; and ways of boosting and maintaining the child's self-esteem. (Standard 9.2). Improving children's own self-esteem is one of the most effective ways to enable children to help themselves avoid becoming victims of abuse.

Supervising social workers should ensure that they pay attention to the training needs of carers and other members of their household, addressing these in the appraisal of training and development needs, and documenting them in the annual carer review report.

Social workers should encourage carers to make use of any available training opportunities run by Slough Borough Council or external agencies.

Further Information

Further helpful and extensive guidance for all carers is contained within the Fostering Network publication 'Safer Caring'. This was published by the Fostering Network in 2006, and the use of extracts from this publication is gratefully acknowledged. Fostering Network also produce a number of relevant leaflets which can be obtained from:

The Fostering Network
87 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8HA
Tel: 020 7620 6400
www.fostering.net

Guidelines for short-break carers on the safe care of disabled children are contained within the Shared Care Network publication 'Safe and Sound'. Further information can be obtained from:

Shared Care Network
63-66 Easton Business Centre
Felix Road
Easton
Bristol BS5 0HE
Tel: 0117 941 5361

Useful numbers:

Fosterline – 0800 040 7675

The foster carers' advice line funded by the DCSF, run in association with the Fostering Network

Childline – 0800 1111

A free 24-hour helpline for children and young people to talk about any problem

Helpful websites:

www.direct.gov.uk

Provides easy access to public services and information (e.g. the law on child car seats).

www.chatdanger.com www.digizen.org

Easy-to-use sites with helpful resources for young people and parents/carers run by the charity Childnet International (www.childnet.com).

www.parentsonline.gov.uk/safety

DCSF online resource that provides information on the latest internet safety issues, forums and a short safety presentation.

www.nch.org.uk/information

Useful information on internet safety, including FAQ's and jargon used – aimed at adults, children and young people.

www.thinkyounow.co.uk

Lots of information about staying safe on the internet, with games for young people to download and play.

www.netsafekids.org

A resource for parents/carers offering guidance on protecting children from pornography and sexual predators on the internet.

Filtering and Monitoring Software:

Sentry Parental Controls – available from pcworld.co.uk

Net Nanny 6 – available from netnanny.co.uk

Safe Eyes Parental Control Suite – available from avanquest.com/uk

Monitoring and Review of this Policy:

This policy will be reviewed by a Team Manager of the Family Placement Service on a two-yearly basis on the date specified on page one of this policy.