

Policy on Dealing With Incidents of Bullying Against Foster Children



Introduction

This paper has been produced to outline to children, parents, foster carers and social workers Foster Care Link's policy on responding to bullying of children placed with foster carers.

Statutory framework

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011 requires fostering services to ensure that carers are aware of the particular vulnerability of looked after children and their susceptibility to bullying and put in place procedures to recognise, record and address any instance of bullying and to help carers cope with it (Standard 3.6)

Bullying

Bullying is not easy to define and there are as many definitions of bullying as there are incidents.

Most bullying will include:

- Deliberate hostility and aggression to the victim
- A victim who is weaker and less powerful than the bullies
- Distress and pain for the victim

Bullying is often ongoing but can also be a one off incident and might include:

- Verbal abuse, including persistent teasing or name calling
- Physical abuse, including actual or threatened harm
- Sexual abuse, including unwanted physical contact or verbal abuse including abusive comments on the victims sexuality
- Racial abuse, which may be physical, written or verbal
- Emotional abuse, including, tormenting or subjecting the victim to persistent ridicule or humiliation
- Online abuse which can include some or all of the above. **(See Internet Policy)**.

Foster carers should talk to children about the possibility of bullying and encourage them to talk about it, rather than waiting until they see signs that the child is being bullied. Once a child becomes a victim of bullying they may either be afraid to talk about it or feel that they may not be believed. If a conversation has already taken place about bullying and they feel that it is safe for them to talk to their carer, they are more likely to be able to disclose.

Why foster children are at particular risk

All bullies need victims. These will almost always be someone who is weaker and/or less confident than the bully.

Bullies will target victims by focusing on something about the victim that is different in order to try and justify their behaviour. This may be the victim's appearance – weight,

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height or other physical features or it may be something else that makes the victim stand out from the majority of their peers – social class, religion or ethnicity.

By definition, children in foster care are different – they do not live at home with their parent(s). Therefore they immediately fit the profile of potential victims for the bully.

In addition there are a number of other common characteristics of foster children that increase the potential for them being targeted. These include:

- Many will already have been targeted and abused by others, including their primary carers
- Many will be developmentally immature
- Many will be lacking in self-confidence
- Some may have experienced prior abuse or victimisation as the only time they have received attention
- Foster children are frequently isolated from their family, peers and other support systems when they become looked after, including perhaps a change of school
- Frequent moves may have led to a sense of insecurity and a fear or inability in developing positive relationships with peers
- A prior lack of positive attachments

Who are the bullies?

There are many reasons why children bully. Some may do it to cope with a difficult situation in their own life such the separation of their parents. Others will see it as a way of gaining respect from their peers. Some are just used to getting their own way and may not even recognise the effect of their actions on their victims.

Some children will become bullies as a result of being a victim themselves. It therefore needs to be recognised that the reasons for some foster children becoming victims are also reasons for others becoming bullies

This will have potential implications for carers fostering more than one child and needs to be borne in mind if it is suspected that a foster child is being bullied.

Bullying at School

For many children their first experience of bullying will be at school. If a foster child discloses that they are being bullied at school or there are signs that that they are being bullied at school, foster carers should immediately inform their supervising social worker and the child's social worker. It will need to be agreed who will contact the child's school to discuss the concerns and how to deal with these.

Possible signs of bullying

Any of the following behaviours may indicate that a child is the victim of bullying. There may equally be other explanations that should also be considered by carers and social workers.

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'A child may indicate by their behaviour that he or she is being bullied. If your child shows some of the following signs, bullying may be responsible and you might want to ask if someone is bullying or threatening them.

Children may:

- *be frightened of walking to or from school*
- *change their usual route*
- *not want to go on the school bus*
- *beg you to drive them to school*
- *be unwilling to go to school (or be school phobic)*
- *feel ill in the mornings*
- *begin truanting*
- *show signs of doing poorly in their school work*
- *come home regularly with clothes or books destroyed*
- *come home starving (bully has taken dinner money)*
- *become withdrawn, start stammering, lack confidence*
- *become distressed and anxious, stop eating*
- *attempt or threaten suicide*
- *cry themselves to sleep; have nightmares*
- *have their possessions 'go missing'*
- *ask for money or start stealing money (to pay the bully)*
- *continually 'lose' their pocket money*
- *refuse to say what's wrong (too frightened of the bully)*
- *have unexplained bruises, scratches, cuts*
- *begin to bully other children or siblings*
- *become aggressive and unreasonable*
- *significantly increase or decrease their use of social media*
- *give improbable excuses to explain any of the above'*

Responding to suspicions or incidents of bullying

All suspected or actual incidents of bullying will be taken seriously by Foster Care Link. They will be fully investigated and support will be provided to the victim as well as their carers.

Foster carers should ensure that they record all suspected or actual incidents and report these to the child's social worker as soon as possible.

The carer and social worker should formulate a plan to address the concerns and this should include:

- who should talk to the child
- who else needs to be notified (eg schools, birth parents)
- whether any immediate action is needed to safeguard the child

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After the concerns have been discussed with the child, if bullying is confirmed or continues to be suspected, a protection plan should be drawn up to attempt to ensure the bullying ceases and does not re-occur.

The carer and the social worker should draw up the plan with the involvement of relevant others who may include:

- the foster child
- other children in the household
- the foster child's birth parent(s)
- the bully
- the social workers and parents of other children in the foster home
- other relevant professionals such as teachers and therapists

If the bullying is being done by someone outside of the foster home attempts should be made to engage the child's parents in helping to put an end to the bullying. The social worker rather than the carer should normally undertake any contact with parents in such circumstances.

Recording

Foster carers should record all suspected and actual incidents of bullying against or by any foster child in their care. These should be reported to the child's social worker as soon as possible.

The carer should also ensure that their supervising social worker is made aware of the incident. Foster Care Link will keep a central record of all reported incidents and the action taken to deal with them.

Safe caring guidelines

All carers are required to produce safe caring guidelines for their home and these must be approved by their supervising social worker and where appropriate the placing social worker and explained to the foster child.

Carers may find it appropriate to include details on how incidents of bullying will be dealt with in the home.

Foster Carer Training

Fostering services are required to ensure that foster carer's training covers managing behaviour and recognising signs of abuse and on ways of boosting and maintaining the child's self-esteem. Improving children's own self-esteem is one of the most effective ways to enable children to help themselves avoid becoming victims

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 which must be documented in the annual review report.

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Social workers should encourage carers to make use of any available training opportunities run by Foster Care Link or external agencies.

Further Information

Further guidance for carers is contained within the Foster Carer Handbook. Further information on the effects of bullying and ways of supporting victims can be obtained from:

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2 Grosvenor Gardens
London
SW1W 0DH

Tel:020 77303300

www.kidscape.org.uk