

Practical guidance for foster carers to support children and young people in their care to make friends

In writing this guidance we are mindful and respectful of the significant challenges faced by some young people in care. Foster carers report feeling helpless when young people's desperation for friendship means their behaviours sometimes 'scare off' their new friend, or when they share inappropriate personal information with their friend. Other carers report the opposite: that their young person is shy, introvert and clingy, refusing any attempt to help them make new friends.

Decades of research suggests that parents play a big role in teaching children how to make friends. The most popular kids are prosocial—i.e caring, sharing and helpful. They also have strong verbal skills and know how to keep their selfish or aggressive impulses in check. Most of all popular kids are good at interpersonal skills: empathy, perspective-taking, and moral reasoning.

(Slaughter et al 2002; Dekovic and Gerris 1994)

Many young people who are in care have not developed the skills and techniques involved in making and maintaining friends. We do know however that friendships matter more than almost anything to young people. Evidence from research shows that having friends impacts on a child's health, happiness and well-being. We also know that

not having friends as a child can impact on adult emotional and mental health.

Developing the skills to make friends is not a quick process for some young people but there are some things you can do as a foster carer to improve their skills and give them more opportunities for friendship.

Finding out what you have in common

Young people often discuss common interests with each other. So talk with your young person about their interests and respect them.

You could talk about anything, including:

- Food
- Music
- Sport
- Apps
- TV programmes
- Computer games
- Celebrities
- Pets
- Books
- Anything that interests them...

Show how to ask other people about their interests and keep a conversation going by not asking closed questions. Encourage them to identify things they have in common with friends and be positive.

Provide opportunities

Encourage inviting friends home after school for tea or just to hang out together. Make sure they know that this is okay and that their friends will be welcome. If you are going on an outing or trip at the weekend, ask if they would like to invite a friend along. This will also give you a chance to observe them interacting with their friends, and you may spot ways in which they can improve their communication skills.

In consultation with foster carers nationally, here are some of their thoughts on providing opportunities for friendship:

Be prepared to travel to areas where the child's friends are, including places where they make new friends.

Foster carer

When my child came to live with me I kept him in his original cub group so that he could keep his friends. That worked well for him.

Foster carer

Find out more about your child's interests; help them become part of the community, joining groups that best meet their interests.

Foster carer

Get them involved in loads of groups and clubs. They are bound to drop a few but if they try everything they will find something they like and will hopefully meet other young people with the same interests.

Foster carer

Be a good role model

Talk to your young person about their feelings and emotions, even when they are displaying negative or aggressive behaviours. They need to be able to reflect on their own behaviours and attitudes and should feel safe to come and speak with you so you can help to keep them safe. Children and young people learn from watching their parents and carers and practising their social skills at home in a safe environment. Give them chance to practise and always try and model the behaviours you would like them to display.

Learning to listen

Teach your child to be an 'active listener'. The key points are:

- When someone is talking show you are listening.
- Say 'yes' or 'mmm' to show you have understood.
- Make eye-contact and nod to show you are listening and you are interested.
- Face the person speaking but don't get too close.
- Ask further questions to show you are interested and you have heard what they said.

You can practise all of these techniques with your young person and see how it feels for them.

When their children and young people are in conflict with friends or don't have any friends, carers may find **active reflective listening skills useful**. Active listening can be a powerful tool when encouraging children to talk about their hurt, anxiety or anger.

Listen to the feeling behind the words

Try to put a name on the feeling

Let them clarify if you get the feeling wrong.

Simple comments: 'you feel bad about that', 'you seem to be saying' ... 'sounds as if you're'... can offer new insights and open up a dialogue that will be more productive than endless questions. Active listening can be the beginning of working out solutions together, avoid the child 'being the victim' and help the child learn the life skills they need to build friendships. Use active listening selectively and avoid over-use.

Try not to be negative about the behaviour or character of the friend who is causing the problem; rather help the child to gain an insight into the thoughts and feelings which lead to the

behaviours of their friends, and learn the skills they need to deal with them. They may be friends again tomorrow!

You shouldn't be working alone

If your young person is having significant difficulties with making and managing friendships you should seek support. It is crucial that everyone involved in your young person's life is aware that this is an issue and should be working to the same plan to resolve the difficulties.

You should mention in your own supervision that this is an area that you need more support with and talk with your supervisor about what additional help might be available. It may be that they could speak with the young person's social worker and perhaps make a referral to your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) team for more intensive support.

Every publicly funded school in England receives a Pupil Premium Plus (additional funding) to raise the attainment of pupils in care, and close the gap between them and their peers. They should have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) that is drawn up by schools and carers in partnership. When children's friendship difficulties are highlighted as an area of need, a specific PEP target related to friendship might be agreed and an intervention funded from the Pupil Premium if this is appropriate. For example schools may be encouraged to spend their Pupil Premium Plus budget on direct support in the playground, lunch time or after school clubs. This could be a mentor or non-teaching assistant.

If your young person has Special Educational Needs (SEN) they may meet the criteria for a Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The EHCP is another opportunity for you to mention the issue of friendship and make sure that everyone involved in your young person's life are doing all they can in their own capacity to support them with friendships.

If friendship can be included in the EHCP or PEP then it will be considered every time the plan is reviewed and you can keep a check on progress (hopefully!) being made.

In short, you should be using all of the support networks available and not try to manage this alone.