

Wirral Fostering Service

Foster Carers Supporting Educational Potential

IT TAKES A BIG **HEART** TO FOSTER



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1. Supporting Educational Potential – the Foster Carers Role

The Every Child Matters Green Paper identified the five outcomes that are most important to children and young people. They are: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, achieve economic well-being. Improving outcomes for all children and young people is a key objective of Children's Services. Education features highly in each of these outcomes, providing the basic skills that all of us need in order to reach our potential and fulfil an active and valuable place in society.

Some of the core skills needed for adult life are: literacy, numeracy, communication and problem solving. Lack of these skills may make it harder for your foster child to thrive in mainstream school and in recognition, the government have made funds available to enable children to close the educational gap and thrive (Pupil Premium Plus). If you struggle with these skills yourself, don't worry, you are not alone. Talk to your Supervising Social Worker who will help you access opportunities to brush up on your skills and be able to fully support foster children.

As the Government has committed public funding to support children in care, Personal Education Plans (PEP's) are a legal requirement for fostered children and young people. In most of the UK. PEP's must be drawn up between school and social care within 10 working days of your child or young person entering care or changing schools. After that the PEP should be reviewed in line with the Care Plan reviews.

Each fostered child or young person must have a termly Personal Education Plan detailing every aspect of their education. It must provide a holistic picture of the child, their strengths and areas for development and their own wishes and feelings. It must also set clear targets for improving educational achievement, personal development, and behaviour and attendance. It should identify short – term, specific targets to enable the child to progress further, any needs or challenges the child may face and how the school staff will support the child to meet targets using Pupil Premium Plus.

These plans need your specific input and monitoring if they are going to make a real difference to your child or young person. As a Foster Carer you are committed to trying to meet the needs of the child as best you can. You will need to be the 'first educator', someone who knows who to turn to for information, advice and support for yourself and the child or young person in your care. You will hold knowledge about all parts of a child's life and, at times, you may be the only person with that knowledge. It is important that you communicate this information professionally with your child's school in order that everyone is fully informed and working together for the good of the child. Your relationship with school will impact directly on the child's view of school and school staff and it is important that this is a positive view of all adults working together to support them.

It is not possible to separate learning from the rest of life. Some things have a strong effect on learning, either enhancing it or making it harder. These include:

- Pre- birth experiences and experiences before coming into care;
- Experience while in care, particularly around placement insecurity;
- Language, culture and ethnicity;
- Health and disability.
- Relationships with others.

Usually the key is to find the right sort of support to help the child or young person get into a 'learning state' and therefore get the most out of education.

Once a child or young person is placed with you, you need to:

- Tell the school as soon as the child is placed with you and ensure that they have all necessary contact details.
- Ask for a copy of the school handbook and check you know the basics, school rules, policies, timetable, and uniform, what happens about dinner money;
- Ask for a copy of the school's homework Policy and behaviour Policy;
- Introduce yourself to the class teacher and Designated Teacher for children in care which is a statutory role which every school must fill and then keep in regular contact. Ask to meet at least once a term;
- If your child has special educational needs make an appointment with the SENDCO to ask how the school will provide for those needs;
- Make sure the child or young person goes to school every day and has the right equipment and clothing; Full attendance at school is a priority for all children but more so for children in care who may have already missed a lot of education.
- For older children it is important to know what courses they are studying and GCSE subjects they will sit examinations in;
- Always arrange holidays, appointments and meetings that involve the child or young person outside of school time; School cannot authorise holidays in term time.
- Keep the child or young person's Social Worker up to date, and ask for help or support as soon as you suspect a problem;
- Make sure the child or young person has somewhere undisturbed to do their homework, read and study and put routines in place to make it easier for them to do their homework;
- Use your home environment, daily life and out of school activities to promote basic skills, learning and personal development;
- Celebrate success and reward the child when they do well.
- Attend the PEP meeting and communicate your understanding of the child's needs which will enable the document to be a full picture of the child which has been informed by all parties.

When meeting with your foster child or young person's teacher you should ask questions like:

- What are my fostered child's strengths?
- Has my fostered child shown any talents?
- What is my fostered child finding difficult? How can I help with this?
- Can you show me any examples of these?
- Does my fostered child try hard enough?
- Does my fostered child join in class Discussions?
- How can I help with my fostered child's schoolwork in general?
- Has my fostered child made sufficient progress since their last report?
- Are they keeping up with other children the same age?
- Is my fostered child happy at school?
- Has my fostered child made friends? If not, why is this and how can I help?
- Does my fostered child's behaviour give any cause for concern? How can I help with this?
- Are there any after school clubs or activities in the community that will help my child?

If the teacher says anything you don't understand, don't be afraid to ask them to explain what they mean.

2. Literacy

Many of the children and young people in foster care may have limited past achievements, if you expect them to continue in this way they probably will. If you expect them to overcome challenges and aim high, and they begin to believe in themselves, then they probably will succeed beyond other people's expectations.

To help improve literacy at any age you should:

- Make your home a place where reading is part of daily life. Read yourself and talk about what you have read in newspapers, books or magazines;
- Turn off the TV when you are reading or listening to someone read;
- Build a collection of books at home. If possible get books that will help children and young people make sense of their own life;
- Join the local library and use it;
- Buy books and book tokens as presents, rewards and treats;
- Make sure you use your World Book Day voucher to get a free book each year (see [World Book Day website](#)).

2.1 Pre-School Age

Pre-school age children who are familiar with books, language and stories do best when they start school:

- Talk to babies from the beginning as if they can hold a conversation with you;
- Spend time each day reading stories;
- Think of safe ways to read bedtime stories so books become associated with feelings of being loved and safe;
- Spend time each day making up stories or describing what is in pictures;
- Give children the opportunity to hold and use books;
- Encourage children to turn the pages while you read;
- Encourage young children to talk about what they see in pictures;
- Be prepared to read the same story over and over again;
- Spend time at the library each week, looking at books together;
- Go to storytelling sessions at the library;
- Use art, craft and games to encourage familiarity with letters, sounds, language and writing.

2.2 Starting School

- Point out words all around you; and help sound out the words eg Asda
- Encourage different adults or older children to read to your fostered child;
- Spend time reading to them every day;
- Once they have started reading, give them the chance to show off their new skill to anyone who will encourage and praise them;

- Let them know it is ok to make mistakes, and don't feel the need to correct every word;
- Give them time; let them guess before you tell them the word;
- Ask the class teacher how reading is taught at this age. Then you will be able to use the same method at home;
- Make use of pictures as clues to the writing, and as something to talk about;
- Encourage them to follow the words with their finger or use a ruler to help them focus on the right line;
- Keep checking that your child understands what he is reading by asking questions such as, 'What do you think will happen next?'
- When looking at a new book spend some time talking about the front cover and guessing what the story might be about;
- Point out the title, author and illustrator on the front cover (using the correct terms) and also read the blurb at the back of the book to find out what it is about;
- Encourage them to start writing and to read back their own writing or to make up the words if they are at the squiggle stage of writing;
- Play alphabet games and I-spy;
- Tell stories with favourite teddies and toys;
- Listen to story tapes/cds in the car.

2.3 Seven to Eleven Year Olds

Most children are reading by this age. Talk to the child's teacher and Social Worker if they are not. Ask what their reading age is and how you can help at home. If you think that a book may be too difficult you could use the five finger test. At the beginning of a page hold up five fingers, every time the child gets stuck put down a finger. If all five fingers are down by the end of the page then the book is too hard and you should tell the teacher that the child is struggling.

- Encourage children to use their new skills by reading to younger children. Lots of practice reading 'easy' books is beneficial;
- Watch for clues about how much help to give. Some children get frustrated quickly; others prefer time to work it out for themselves;
- Once they can read whole sentences, encourage them to read with expression and put on voices for different characters;
- Ask lots of questions about the story, such as:
 - What would you have done if you were.....?
 - Does this book remind you of anything that happened to you?
 - Which is your favourite character? Why?
 - Does this story remind you of others you have read?
 - Can you guess what is going to happen next?
- Keep up reading the bedtime stories as long as they are wanted, and also encourage children to read themselves in bed;
- Encourage them to read instructions, recipes and signs;
- Buy a simple dictionary and use it to check out the meanings of new words;
- Make literacy fun - make a scrap book, play computer games that involve reading, do word searches or play scrabble as a family;
- Buy the book of a film they have enjoyed;
- Listen to story tapes/CDs or watch film and TV versions of books

2.4 Eleven to Sixteen Year Olds

- Encourage them to read leaflets, websites, newspapers, magazines as well as books;
- Expect them to be reading, and ask about what books they are enjoying. Also tell them about the books you are reading;
- Keep in touch with school and specifically ask about reading and writing. If you have any worries ask for an assessment to see if they have a specific learning difficulty and find out what may help them;
- Use a dictionary and encourage the young person to do the same. Make sure they know the limits of spell checkers (for example, they will not tell you if you have used 'there' instead of 'their');
- Look out for a book club or library group for young people this age.

3. Numeracy

Having number skills means far more than just being able to count and do arithmetic. Think of all the times you use maths in daily life. You use number skills to:

- Work out how many litres of milk to buy each day;
- Check your bank statement;
- Keep a rough idea of the cost as you put things in your shopping trolley;
- Point out that £10 is not enough to buy the jeans and the t-shirt;
- Look up bus or train times;
- Work out if you have time to finish your magazine before picking someone up for an activity.

To help improve number skills for any age you should:

- Use your number skills out loud as you go about daily life so your home is a place where children and young people feel comfortable around numbers;
- Make connections between maths at school and daily life;
- Try not to mention it if you didn't like or weren't good at maths at school.

3.1 Pre-School

- Count the stairs, count footsteps, count cars on the road, count things in pictures - just keep counting;
- Sing some counting songs - One man Went to Mow, Ten Green Bottles, There Were Ten in the Bed, etc.;
- Play with Mega blocks or Duplo to get familiar with shapes and making patterns;
- Give them a sense of 'before breakfast', 'in the morning', 'after lunch'. Being aware of how time passes will help them when they learn to tell the time;
- Sorting and grouping toys can be fun - for example, how can we sort these dinosaurs into groups? Can you put the cars in order of size? Put the buttons into groups of the same colour.

3.2 Starting School

- Start working on money skills and recognising different coins;
- Most children will play shops with you for hours;
- Play games involving counting forwards and backwards, such as snakes and ladders;
- Save up pennies to make shop games more fun;
- Use Lego to make shapes and patterns;
- Talk about budgeting and saving whenever you go shopping. Help them to make a connection between money, saving up and buying things ready for when they get their own pocket money;
- Start work on learning their home phone number and be able to dial it;
- Talk about patterns - on tiles, floors, curtains, clothes, wallpaper, etc.;
- Look for numbers in the house, on the street, on car registrations.

3.3 Seven to Eleven Year Olds

- Help them to budget their own pocket money. Let them take responsibility for buying personal things;
- Open a bank account and let them take control of it when they are ready;
- Encourage them to read a TV programme guide and work out timings;
- Get them to count out the cutlery or check the fridge to see if there are enough yogurts for tea;
- See if they can work out how to share things fairly, such as cutting up a pizza for eight people;
- Cook together - let them weigh out the ingredients, decide on which containers to use, set the timer on the oven;
- Play games where they have to keep scores - darts, stop the clock, or card games such as 21.

3.4 Eleven to Sixteen Year Olds

- Don't tell them what they can afford with their clothing allowance. Get them to work it out for themselves - with your help if they need it;
- Talk about credit cards, how you pay rent or a mortgage, how much weekly benefits pay and how difficult it would be to budget on this amount;
- Encourage them to open a bank account, maybe an online account with text alerts when money is running low;
- Discuss which is the best value mobile phone package;
- Talk about what maths they are learning at school, and look for ways to make connections between school and daily life.

4. Communication

The ability to communicate is essential. For most people this involves words, and listening and speaking skills. Both people also need to share an understanding of what the words mean. This is most obviously a problem if two people speak different languages, it can also be a problem when two people use the same word or phrase but attach a different meaning to it.

For some people, communication is by sign language. In the UK, British Sign Language is the main sign language which combines hand movements and facial expressions.

Some people learn a form of signing called Makaton, a communication aid with limited vocabulary. Another system, PECS, involves the use of picture cards where each picture represents what the person wants to communicate.

Some children and young people will need extra help to communicate clearly. The best way you can help someone do this is to spend plenty of time in conversation with them. Reading is a great way to build vocabulary and think about different ways of using words to express yourself.

5. Problem Solving

There are three key skills to problem solving:

- Thinking about the problem (analysis);
- Planning and doing (action);
- Learning from the result (evaluation).

These three skills apply to everything, from sharing biscuits to negotiating a multi-million pound corporate merger. You need them for relationships, your social life, work and study. Whenever your foster child is faced with a problem, walk them through the three steps: think, plan and learn.