

Fosterline Wales Factsheet

Religion and foster care

Introduction

Religion and belief systems play a significant, often central, role in many people's lives. They have the potential for promoting resilience and providing an extensive support network, but there is also the possibility that they can cause tension within fostering.

As a foster carer, an important thing to remember, when your religious beliefs might clash with a foster child's, is that they have a right to choose their own religion. Or, if they are younger, their biological parents have the right to decide for them. You may not always agree, but accepting your beliefs are different and being accommodating is key to maintaining a good fostering relationship.

Valuing a child or young person's religion or belief system

A child or young person may come into foster care from a family that practises a religion or belief system. Understanding the family's beliefs and practices is an important part of understanding the child or young person and supporting them to develop a healthy identity and sense of belonging. Involvement in a religious community can be particularly important for identity and wellbeing if a child or young person cannot live with their family, particularly if they have experienced moves and changes within the looked after system.

Part of valuing a child or young person's religion is how you respond if they experience unlawful discrimination or hate crime because of their religion. Foster carers need to take any incidents seriously, reporting any to the fostering service and the police and support the child or young person to remain positive about their religion and identity.

What is important is for a foster carer to be able to meet the needs of a child, including their religious needs. Valuing a child or young person's religion or belief system does not mean you must agree with it or be a member of the same religion. You do need to communicate with appreciation and understanding about it, value it for its role in the child or young person's life and, where necessary, help facilitate the child or young person's practising of their religion. Equally, if a child or young person does not have a religion or belief system, you need to affirm them in this.

Who decides a child's religious practices?

Legally, a child or young person has the right to practise whatever religion and hold whatever beliefs they choose, provided this does not conflict with other people's rights or lead them to break the law.

There can be disagreement between a child and their parents about religion and religious practices. If this occurs, you need to notify the child's social worker and your fostering agency at the earliest opportunity, to enable any friction to be resolved before it escalates.

It is never acceptable for a foster carer to attempt to change a child's religion or belief system. If you think a child or young person may want to change their religion or belief system, particularly if it is to adopt your religion or belief system, it is vital to notify their social worker and your fostering agency without delay. Delegated authority does not extend to matters of religion.

Dealing with conflicting beliefs

If you are fostering a child who holds different beliefs to your own, it's beneficial to have as much discussions with both your supervising social worker and the child's biological family as you possibly can, in order to learn about their beliefs and provide advice as to how best to support them. Talking to the child's biological parents won't always be possible, if this is the case, if the child is old enough, chat to them and ask them how you can help them. For example, do they need anything from you, such as to take them to mosque or church, or to provide a specialist diet?

Concerns about religious practices

Concerns can arise over what the foster carer sees as harmful practices associated with a religion, or the effect they believe it is having on the child or young person's emotional development and mental health. These need to be discussed with the child's social worker and addressed in the care and support plan. Please raise concerns, even if you are unsure whether your concern is justified or might have arisen due to your lack of familiarity and understanding of an unfamiliar religion, religious practice or belief system.

Fostered young people who are searching for a sense of belonging and purpose, may be more vulnerable to radicalisation or extreme religious practices. Again, it is important to raise concerns with the child's social worker and your fostering agency. You may also want to seek advice from the NSPCC (see Resources).

Radicalisation is a difficult topic to raise in discussion with your child and must be dealt with sensitively. In order to prevent them being unintentionally exposed to radical ideas, it is important that you are approachable, and they feel that they can talk to you if they have been exposed to radical ideas online. Remaining calm about the situation will also help your child be more open and more honest with you. Your child's beliefs are a sensitive subject and need managing carefully, as you don't want them to withdraw from you.

Fostering if you practise a religion or a belief system

Religious beliefs and values are often a strong motivator to foster. It is important to explore how your beliefs and values could both enhance and reduce your ability to meet the needs of a fostered child or young person.

Before fostering, those who hold strong religious views need to consider how they would feel if a child or young person was placed with them whose lifestyle or background is one that contradicts the beliefs they hold. They would also need to be sure that they could abide by the fostering agency's policies and are prepared to meet the needs of any child placed with them. Of course, if you practise a particular religion your fostering service may decide it is not a particularly good match to place a child of another religion with you – for example, if you go to church on Sundays it may not be a good match for a Muslim teenager who does not wish to attend church with you, but may also not be able to spend Sunday mornings on their own at your home.

There are a small number of fostering agencies that recruit from specific religions, but most welcome applications from people of any religion or none.

Fostering a child or young person whose religion or belief system is different from your own

Religion and a belief system is an important part of matching a child or young person with a foster family. Occasions arise when this is not possible.

It is important to talk about this as part of the placement agreement. Be aware of what you may need to change in your home (such as meals) and routine (such as attending a place of worship, or not being able to attend your own place of worship). If you do not feel able to support the child or young person in a way that builds their identity and sense of belonging, both in your home and in their religious community, you must speak up before the child or young person is placed with you.

If the placement is to be made, it is helpful for you or the child's social worker to talk with the child's parents or wider family about their day-to-day religious practices and expectations, rather than making assumptions. You should also seek to, where possible, make use of other foster carers or the wider community for that particular religion.

Resources

The BBC has useful introductions to the main world religions
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/

The NSPCC provides advice on protecting children and young people from radicalisation
www.nspcc.org.uk/what-you-can-do/report-abuse/dedicated-helplines/protecting-children-from-radicalisation/

Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH) is a national award-winning charity that provides free and confidential faith and culturally sensitive support services, targeted at vulnerable young people in the UK. 0808 808 2008

Parents can call the NSPCC's free 24/7 adult helpline on 0808 800 5000, email help@nspcc.org.uk or text 88858. You can also contact the Stop it Now! helpline on 0808 1000 900, where you can seek advice anonymously

Muslim Foster Network support non-Muslim foster carers to care for a Muslim child, as well as supporting Muslim applicants and foster carers
www.muslimfosternetwork.org.uk/

How The Fostering Network can help

The Fostering Network offers advice, information and support. Our expertise and knowledge are always up-to-date and available through our vital member helplines, publications, training and consultancy.

Advice

Fosterline Wales

Call us on 0800 316 7664 from 9.30am - 12.30pm Monday to Friday.

If you call outside this time please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as possible.

You can email us or write to us at:

Fosterlinewales@fostering.net

The Fostering Network Wales

33 Cathedral Road

Cardiff CF11 9HB

Support and resources

Our website is an essential source of information, while our online community brings together foster carers for peer support and advice. You can login to share your experience and get advice from other foster carers. Our online community is a safe and secure area to discuss foster care matters.

thefosteringnetwork.org.uk

Training and consultancy

Wherever you are in your fostering career, as a foster carer, social worker or manager, The Fostering Network has a range of training designed to meet your development needs.

For more information contact our learning and development manager, Sarah Mobedji at sarah.mobedji@fostering.net

About The Fostering Network

The Fostering Network is the UK's leading fostering charity, bringing together everyone who is involved in the lives of fostered children to make foster care the very best it can be.

Contact

To find out more about our work in Wales, please contact:
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