

Keep Connected Principles

Children and young people who move within and out of the care system should be enabled and supported to maintain their relationships with their former foster families and other people who are significant to them.

Rationale

Moving on in foster care – to adoption, back home or to wider family, to another foster family, to residential care or to adulthood – is a time for a proper ending, not a forever goodbye, as abrupt endings are likely to lead to separation and loss issues for the child.

What we know about attachment in terms of transitions is very different from thinking 20 years ago. Previously it was believed that a child should be supported in transferring their attachment from one set of carers to another – old attachments would be replaced by a new attachment.

Now, it is widely held that an important role of the foster carer is to support a child to develop a strong internal working model¹ (incorporating resilience, confidence, self-esteem, problem solving abilities) and because of this children are capable of developing additional secure attachments.

This change in understanding is critical to the role that foster carers play in supporting a child in the transition to their new family or living arrangements, and advocates a need for the supportive and positive presence of the foster carers throughout and beyond the transition process. While there will be some occasions when it is not in a child's best interests to keep in contact with their previous foster families or others, these will be the exception rather than the rule. We need a culture shift to ensure that the starting position in any transition planning is for ongoing contact.

1. An internal working model is a set of expectations and beliefs about the self, others and the relationship between the self and others developed by John Bowlby, founder of attachment theory.

The Fostering Network has developed a set of principles, in consultation with foster carers, fostering services and organisations in the care sector, including those working with young people, to shape how transitions from and within the care system are approached across the UK. The aim is for all children and young people who are moving on from foster families to be enabled to keep in touch with them – and with other significant people in their lives – through better understanding of the importance of this, planning and support.

Principles

- 1.** The child's relationship with their foster family is important and this relationship – alongside those with other significant people in the child's life – should not be ended abruptly, which could cause unnecessary trauma.
- 2.** The child's feelings should be held in mind and responded to sensitively. Where it is possible, children should be consulted about the relationships that are important to them and how they would like to maintain contact.
- 3.** Every member of the team around the child should understand the importance of the child's key relationships, particularly the foster family, throughout the transition and beyond.
- 4.** Maintaining contact after a fostered child moves on should be routinely considered part of the role of a foster carer, and foster carers should be supported to carry this out.
- 5.** The relationship between the foster carer and the new family, in whatever form that takes, should be promoted as an ongoing working relationship that needs to be sustained and supported sufficiently over a period of time.
- 6.** Birth family members and adopters should be encouraged and supported to enable their children to maintain contact with former foster families.
- 7.** Where it is not possible to maintain direct contact with foster families in the longer term, children and foster carers should be encouraged to keep in contact in other ways. This could include letters, cards, telephone calls and social media, but should not be used as substitutes for the initial face-to-face contact post-move, unless absolutely necessary.

