



Fosterline
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your fostering advice service

www.fosterline.info

Guidance on fostering with pets in the home

In the UK almost half of all families own a pet or animal of some sort with almost one in every four families owning a dog. The fostering environment will encompass these animals so will naturally be included in the assessment to become a foster carer and be part of ongoing supervision for approved foster carers.

Attitudes to all animals differ from person to person and can evoke both positive and negative feelings dependent on personal experience, culture and belief. Matching processes should take into consideration any allergies the child may have to animals when placing in a foster carers home that includes pets.

Animals and children in care

Animals can perform a positive role in the wellbeing and outcomes for children in care. They can aid the child to explore companionship, affection, care and have a positive therapeutic effect for children. Pets can be the common ground for communication between children joining new family surroundings and the foster carer. Some pets can help in the attachment behaviour of children and teach how to form relationships (this has been especially prevalent in dogs).

Dogs



The law around keepings dogs is relatively straightforward and governed by the Control of Dogs Order 1992 and the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (amended in 1997 and 2014) and from April 2016 it will be a legal requirement to have your dog microchipped.

Dogs are often seen as fully integrated members of the family and a foster child will need to find their position within the family structure.

Unfortunately children do get bitten and the risk must never be minimised or neglected. For every child that is bitten this will be a significant incident, with potential physical and psychological consequences and every precaution must be made to reduce the potential of a child being bitten. Dogs can also be very boisterous and playful and where the risk is more evident in larger dogs the risk of injury from dogs jumping up or inadvertently knocking over a child.

Dogs can carry zoonotic diseases (animal diseases that can be transferred to humans). To combat these ensure you have robust processes in place such as:

- Wash hands thoroughly with antibacterial soap after handling your dog
- Ensure the wearing of protective gloves when removing faeces
- Dispose of dog faeces appropriately within the home environment with any chemicals used for dog waste bins kept in locked storage
- Treat your dog for worms regularly
- Maintain the dogs inoculations

Where people are allergic to dogs (and other pets) foster carers need to be sensitive to people that come into the home. For instance some of the social workers and other professionals that work with you and the children in your care may be allergic or have a phobia.

For some children from particular religious or cultural groups the placement with a family that have a dog would be inappropriate. A prime example would be for Muslim children in that no dogs are allowed to enter a place of prayer, whether that is in the young person's bedroom or in the mosque.

Children and young people can pose a serious risk to dogs. This aggression might be the result of their own experience of violence and abuse, or because they are unaware how to react with the dog.

Assessments should take into consideration the following:

- How you react with the dog and its position in the family
- How socialised the dog is and its reaction to other people
- Your understanding of how to interact with the dog and how you would expect children to interact with the dog
- How you ensure never to leave the dog alone unsupervised with children
- You ensure the dog has separate toys from the children
- The dogs sleeping arrangements and a safe place for the dog to retreat to get away from unwanted attention
- How aware you are of the dog's body language and signs of stress.

Cats

On the whole cats are actually more commonly kept as pets than dogs and although they do not come with some of the fearsome qualities that certain breeds of dog do, it is important to remember that they can be unpredictable, have the potential to scratch and bite, with some cats being less comfortable around people than others.

Any cat's health and hygiene will be a consideration in the same way any dogs would be. Regular vet appointments to maintain vaccinations and boosters would be expected along with the preventative treatments for parasites, worms, lice and fleas. Cats tend to be more agile than dogs and provide a greater risk of jumping onto work surfaces.

The nature of some cats can lead them to bringing birds, rodents and other small animals into the house and as such this will need to be managed.

Toilet training presents a risk assessment and the arrangements must be considered and how this could impact on the health of any child within the household. Toxoplasmosis is an infection caused by a parasite often found in the faeces of cats which can be transmitted to children and others by the consumption of food, water, soil (garden borders), sand (children's sand pits) and fingers contaminated or infected by cat faeces. Babies and young children with weakened immune systems are at particular risk.



Proof of good basic hygiene practices will be important for your assessment and should include:

- Wearing gloves when performing gardening tasks especially around borders and soil
- Wear gloves when changing the litter tray
- Change the litter tray daily (toxoplasma parasites become infectious after 24 hours)
- Wash hands in plenty of soap and hot water after tasks
- Cover all children's sand pits
- Maintain vet visits for inoculations, treatments and general health checks
- Always use cot or pram nets and refrain cats from climbing onto nursery furniture or prams
- Never leave a baby and a cat alone together
- Provide a safe retreat for the cat away from children

Snakes and reptiles



Far less common than cats and dogs snakes and reptiles like many other pets can have potential benefits to children in foster care especially surrounding education, leisure interests and learning about responsibility for other living things.

Snakes insects and reptiles present their own unique risks which need to be taken in to consideration for instance whether they are venomous or not. The keeping of venomous animals requires registration under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 and any person granting the license will need to be involved in considering the compatibility with the roll of foster caring.

Assessments would take into consideration the feeding arrangements for the animals and in some cases the issue of providing live prey governed under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

The health risk of salmonella would need to be considered as the bacteria can be passed on from stroking a reptile's skin. A clear handwashing procedure would need to be incorporated into the daily care of the animals for anyone who came into contact with them.

Some reptile specialists suggest that reptiles are unsuitable pets for families with babies and small children.

Points to reinforce during assessment would be:

- Strict supervision of children around the reptile
- Restrict where reptiles can roam freely and exclude from all areas where food is prepared and eaten
- Strict washing of hands following contact with animals and equipment
- Dispose of waste water and faeces appropriately and not down sinks or bathtubs

The onus will be on you as a prospective foster carer to have robust and efficient strategies and routines in place to reduce any risk to a level that is acceptable, to explain how the situation is sufficiently safe around some of the most vulnerable children.

Fish

Fish are the most kept pet in the UK and first thoughts may not present any perceived risk to children. What needs to be considered is the environment and the risk of a child careering into the tank or young children getting into the tank. The presence of fishponds and the potential of drowning presents a whole set of issues. Ponds will be assessed as part of the general home safety check (the presence of any fish is irrelevant).



The chemicals used in water purification and cleaning need to be kept safely out of harm's way and the fish tank can be a breeding ground for salmonella so a precaution ensuring the washing of hands is essential.

Birds



A number of households keep pet birds and as with all animals the hygiene of the birds is a relevant risk factor. Birds will have the potential to peck, bite and claw individuals. There is also the potential for birds to carry diseases that can be transferred to humans but simple precautions and hygienic practices should significantly lower the potential risk.

Psittacosis affects the respiratory system and produces breathing difficulties leading to influenza-like symptoms and even severe pneumonia. Psittacosis occurs through the inhalation of airborne respiratory secretions, dried faeces, feather dust or the handling of infected birds. This risk can be dramatically reduced by having in place robust cleaning and hygiene routines such as:

- Regular cleaning of cages and enclosures to remove faeces build up (reducing the risk of the waste to dry and become airborne)
- Disinfection of feeding and watering bowls and equipment on a daily basis
- Using litter on the bottom of cages that doesn't produce dust

Rabbits and Rodents

Rabbits and rodents will need to be assessed in a way that takes into consideration both the animal and the environment. For example do birth children look after the pets and what role will the foster children play in this. Appropriate supervision will be high on the agenda for the care of the animals.



Individual animals have their own ingrained behaviours which will prompt different responses from the animals. For instance rabbits have the potential to scratch and bite and can be influenced by the sex of the animal, temperature, frequency of being handled and the environment to name but a few contributing factors.

You may need to revisit the assessment of the animals with each placement as the behaviours of the children will be different towards the pets and should be included in supervision with your supervising social worker.

Horses



The therapeutic benefits of both riding and caring for horses has been recognised so prospective foster carers that own horses have a potential benefit for children in their care. But as with the husbandry of all animals the potential risks and the management of these risks will be assessed as part of the approval process. The British Horse Society and Blue Cross provide helpful information about safety and horse ownership. Responsible horse owners should ensure that third party liability insurance cover is in place as there will be a risk when children are riding horses (especially on the road) of injury and third party claims.

Farm Animals

Farmers or others that keep livestock although not normally pets will also need to be risk assessed during the approval process for prospective foster carers. Foster children will more often than not come from very different backgrounds so the farming environment will present many different challenges and risks for children placed outside their comfort zone. Assessment will relate more to the general safety check of the environment and accommodation than the specific animals. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provides information about preventing accidents to children on farms.

In Conclusion

All fostering service providers should have policies regarding animals and pets and those policies will differ and be specific for that service provider and will ultimately decide on the perceived risks involved.

Points to remember:

- The benefits and positive aspects for children in care and the keeping of pets must be balanced alongside any risks or problematic aspects
- A blanket policy will not cover every pet and individual animals and environment should take precedence
- Animals registered or recognised as dangerous or as venomous will usually be deemed incompatible with fostering
- It may be appropriate to obtain specialist advice and assessment such as the local authority dog warden
- Animals should maintain annual inoculations and regular treatments to maintain good health
- Any animal may impact on the matching process when placing children and could restrict placements once approved

Sensible measures can minimise the risk to children living in foster care and childhood can be enriched by the companionship of a pet.

(Information reference BAAF Good Practice Guide Dogs and Pets in Fostering & Adoption)



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