Using the garden to benefit the fostering family

The therapeutic nature of gardens

Having a garden is a relative luxury in this day and age where urban areas are becoming dense with housing and offices. If you are a foster carer fortunate enough to have a back garden, then this can act as a therapeutic area, not just for your own family but for foster children as well. Gardens by their very nature are calming with grass, trees and greenery and can act as a special space for thought and reflection. An oasis of calm in nature that allows children to run around, get exercise, feel happy and energised.

If your garden is small or paved, you can still achieve a creative space by swapping plants and cuttings with family and friends and attending local plant sales using a modest budget. You don’t have to be green fingered or a gardening expert to achieve a useful outdoor space. Gardening is a joint activity that can be fun, calming and educational and can help young people build relationships with their foster carers. It can help offer the child a sense of purpose and achievement to see the sapling of a seed grow through to maturity by feeding, watering, replanting, and monitoring its growth, particularly supporting the bonding process in the early stages of foster child or young person getting to know one another.

Having discussions or undertaking gardening tasks with a foster child or young person can be a ‘safe’ topic particularly if the child or young person is struggling emotionally as it can support a positive focus or distraction at these times. It also gives an opportunity to educate children on the origin of fruits and vegetables and harvest any fresh produce they have grown to prepare a meal for the foster family and expand their diet choices by trying new foods.

Pets and wildlife

A foster child or young person can also be encouraged to keep an outdoor pet like a guinea pig or rabbit if appropriate. This will give the child or young person an opportunity to have further responsibility and develop a possible healing relationship with an animal where learning to care, how to handle and promote the health of the pet will further enhance their understanding of skills in caring for others. Children may enjoy being involved in encouraging wildlife into the garden via the creation of simple bug houses/butterfly hotels. Further information is available here: www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/give-nature-a-home-in-your-garden/garden-activities/build-a
Activities encouraging play

Colourful play areas can be set up for younger children and young people to support their social and emotional development, such as sand trays and water trays and painting areas or collecting flowers to press as part of their life story work. Playing outdoors encourages a child’s imagination and promotes creativity. The NHS recommends that children aged 5 to 18 do at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day, so if the garden allows; foster children can be encouraged by their carers to play sports such as practicing football skills, playing badminton or any other sport/dance skills or extracurricular activity. It’s important for children to have a connection and understand the world from nature’s perspective, not just from academic teaching or playing computer games and watching TV, but to directly experience nature for themselves.

Another activity which may support a foster child’s relationship with their foster carer is personalising garden stones by painting or placing hand prints on them. These stones can be taken by the foster child when they move on or kept as a memory in the carer’s home for other children to see and recognise they are not alone. Children may benefit from sensory experiences in the garden so consider different colours, fragrance, textures and sounds.

Promoting outdoor safety

Having highlighted the positives about gardens we must also highlight the general safety issues. To ensure safe play and a safe space, all gardens will need to be risk assessed. You may find the following information helpful:

- Ensure all plants are safe and not poisonous. Poisonous plants should not be in the garden. If they already are, they should be removed. Thorny plants such as some roses etc may also pose a risk to young children. www.wigan.gov.uk/Docs/PDF/Business/Professionals/Childminders/Poisonous-plants.pdf

- Ensure any ponds or outdoor swimming pools are filled in or securely fenced off as they can be safety hazards for younger children. Ensure any water features do not present a hazard and discuss any new additions to the garden with your supervising social worker as they may need to update your home safety document.

- Steps or uneven ground in the garden on different levels needs to be managed in an age appropriate way with children supervised and monitored according to their age and ability. Handrails should be placed wherever there are steps if possible, to ensure children can steady themselves.

- Play equipment should be safety tested and carry a BS number whenever possible. Surround play equipment such as slides, swings etc with soft areas to prevent bumps, grazes and scratches. Play equipment should be erected over a soft covered area/soft grassy area and not be placed over flagged or concrete areas. All equipment should be securely fastened down. Supervision should be given as age-appropriate.

- Ensure any trampolines have the appropriate coverings and side nets and follow the guidelines regarding its use in relation to the number of children allowed on, minimum age and any guidance regarding wearing socks etc.
Promoting outdoor safety

- Supervise barbeques at all times and tidy away the equipment after use. Remember they remain hot and hazardous for some time after they have been used.

- Sand pits should always be covered when not in use, especially if there are pets which could use the sand pit. A small child could choke if he or she were to fall face down in the sand. The sand should not be too deep as this could increase a risk of suffocation. Also, old sand can breed bacteria so it needs to be replaced in a timely fashion to prevent infection.

- For homes with pets, bear in mind that animal waste can be hazardous to children. For instance, dog waste can cause toxocariasis (which can potentially cause blindness). Ensure there is a separate area in the garden/outdoors if dogs excrete there, that is not accessible to children. All animal waste should be cleaned up immediately.

- Power tools can cause serious injury. They may be difficult/impossible for children to control. They should be kept securely locked away.

- Gates leading to the street should be kept locked with devices that are out of a child’s reach. Children can squeeze through small gaps and enter street/road areas where they may be at risk. They may also get trapped in the fencing. Fencing should be well-maintained and secure, without any protruding nails or sharp pieces of wood. Children should not be able to leave the house or garden without their carer’s knowledge.

- Ensure all vehicles are kept locked when not in use and that children cannot gain access to machinery be that a lawnmower, motorbike, old car, or any other machinery.

- Large drain covers could lead to children being curious and wanting to open and explore. The covers are heavy, and could cause serious injury if they fell on fingers and children could fall in and get trapped inside. Small drain covers can hold bacteria. Drain covers should be kept clean.

- Where there are nests or hives in the garden, ensure children and young people cannot access them. Contact the Environmental Health department to manage the situation and reduce the risk.

- If social events include the consumption of alcohol, ensure it is safely stored and used responsibly by all present. If having a social event consider the use of plastic /acrylic or disposable cups/plates to reduce risks from broken glass etc.

- Check that you have all the relevant information on a child’s needs such as allergies to wasp stings or additional needs (such as Pica) that may require a higher level of supervision or additional training when outdoors.

- Consider the sun and shade areas and ensure children are appropriately protected via clothing and sun cream. 

- It can be fun to splash in puddles or collect leaves in the autumn and make snow fairies but ensure children are suitably clothed. Decking can get slippery when wet so use anti slip products and take extra care.