

Be Prepared for Christmas

Fosterline
0800 040 7675
your fostering advice service

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#ChristmasInCare

Christmas is nearly upon us and excitement is already in the air! For some children and young people however, Christmas is filled with a sense of anxiety, fear and stress which can often lead to heightened emotions and difficulties in managing their behaviours.

Fears for children in care may be associated with difficult memories from the past or a sense of loss as they do not feel 'part of the foster family', they may feel like an 'outsider' and cannot associate with the traditional annual festivities that others around in the foster family recall and enjoy.

Having worked for many years with both children and fostering families I have been privileged to be a small part of different individuals experiences and fostering journeys . One story always remains with me:

Two years ago, half siblings Stacey and John, aged 8 years and 4 years were placed on a short term basis with experienced foster carers, Bob and Betty. It was the second week of March and Bob and Betty were called in an emergency to care for them. The children had never been in foster care before but had been known to the Local Authority who had offered support to the family to help their mother and stepfather in providing appropriate care to the children.

As experienced foster carers, Bob and Betty were always prepared and ready to welcome a child into their home. They had a few items of clothing in stock for a wide age range of children and the children's bedrooms were always prepared, with an album of their family pictures to welcome them and make them feel more at home upon their arrival.

Bob and Betty had been provided with

some information regarding the children's experiences and were aware that their mother and stepfather were both drug users and had difficulties regulating their alcohol intake.

The Local Authority made the decision to remove the children following a significant decline in their physical and emotional presentation, and their parents lack of engagement in working with the Local Authority to support the children's needs. Bob and Betty were immediately welcoming, calming and warm towards both children. During the early days Stacey was insistent that she dressed and supported her brother, protecting him in the foster home and keeping him safe from anyone who attempted to interact with him. Bob and Betty showed a great deal of understanding and empathy with the children. Betty took them shopping and allowed Stacey to choose some clothes and food items that they liked, Stacey had a new school uniform that she was immensely proud of , she had always been teased for being unkempt and poorly dressed by her peers at school and was clearly happier as she arrived in school in her smart uniform.

With time Stacey became more relaxed in her foster home and she allowed her foster carers to take over the full-time care of her brother and so allowing Stacey to play and enjoy being a little girl, rather than a carer.

Stacey and John enjoyed some contact with their birth family although this was sometimes difficult when they did not arrive. Bob and Betty were always very supportive following these difficult times as Stacey would often present with challenging behaviours and sadness.

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Bob and Betty offered a consistent routine to the children, allowing them to be safe in the knowledge that whilst they might not always like the difficult behaviours that Stacey and John would present with, they were always warm and welcoming and gave them the time and reassurance to know that they would never be rejected, especially following difficult contacts or when nobody arrived!

Over time Stacey and John's mother finally started to engage with the local authority social worker and made a choice to leave her partner, to focus on improving her own health. Stacey attended regular parenting classes, she worked hard to manage her personal debt and finances and showed commitment to attending contact sessions.

Since their placement, Christmas has always been a time that could be emotionally difficult, especially for Stacey. With support from her carers Stacey eventually felt able to confide in Betty that when she lived at home, strangers continually visited the house, there was no excitement, no Christmas gifts or fun, but an overwhelming sense of fear and anxiety.

As experienced foster carers, Bob and Betty have always been mindful to be fully prepared for Christmas. They have supported the children by attending Christmas nativity plays and events, to ensure that they were always there, in the audience and cheering them on. Whilst it was difficult to build a positive relationship with the children's mother initially when Stacey and John's mother showed anger and defiance towards them, she slowly built trust with both foster carers and even shared her thanks for everything that they had done to support her children.

In partnership with the local authority

social worker, Bob and Betty prepared Christmas contact events where Bob and Betty prepared food for the children to enjoy with their birth family at contact. Stacey was able to choose presents for her mother and helped Bob and Betty wrap them. The children were also able to open presents from her mother during contact which they found was helpful and less overwhelming on Christmas day as it enabled them to fully immerse themselves enjoying Christmas with mum before preparing for Christmas with their foster carers and extended family. Having enjoyed a Christmas celebration with their mother Bob and Betty found that the children were more able to allow themselves to enjoy the celebrations with their foster children.

Bob and Betty shared the following tips that have helped them support children in their care at Christmas time:

- . Plan your Christmas events with the children in your care. What will you do on Christmas Eve for instance – new pyjamas, a Christmas movie together? Involve them with the preparation to reduce their anxiety and to help them know they are part of the festivities.**
- . As discussed – think about the best way to manage contact with birth families, whether this be a pre Christmas celebration or a well timed phone call.**
- . Reassure the children that everyone in the foster home receives presents. Make sure you have batteries at the ready for toys that need them and scissors to deal with toys that are difficult to open. Frustrations can be minimised by preparing in this way.**

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If a child appears to try and 'sabotage' Christmas and discards a much wanted toy or separates himself from activities, wanting to be alone, don't over react, give him/her time, reassure them and try to engage him/her in something – a film, a warm drink and some comfort.

. Think about the consumption of alcohol. If the children in your care have been subject to abuse due to excessive alcohol consumption, perhaps consider abstaining from alcohol until the children are safely tucked up in bed.

. Liaise with the children's schools to ensure that you minimise stress and maximise the enjoyment for children. For children who show anxiety around food, involve them in the food shopping, design the menu together or seek their help in unpacking the Christmas food shopping.

. For children of different faiths, Christmas may have little relevance. Research their religion and prepare. Allow them to understand what Christmas is all about, to partake should they wish to but also to have space and time to consider their own culture and creed.

. Consider who will be present during the Christmas festivities. Will it be too overwhelming, plan carefully and consider possible triggers that may impact on a child's behaviour.

. Give the child in your care some space. Take some time to understand how your child may be feeling, remember that consistency and routine remains key.

. Be prepared for a last minute placement

prior to Christmas – perhaps ensure you have a stocking that has their name on it waiting to be filled and some gifts that could be enjoyed by children of different age groups. If unlike Stacey and John, children have enjoyed Christmas gifts outside the foster home, ensure they know Santa will visit them again at the foster home.

If you feel you have the skills to offer a foster home to a child and you would like to know more about becoming a foster carer, please contact Fosterline.

Fosterline provides confidential, impartial advice to foster carers and prospective foster carers.

Fosterline advisors are available to speak with you from Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm and our telephone number is 0800 040 7675.

Alternatively you can access our website: www.fosterline.info where you will be able to find further information.