

Chapter 1

Introduction

Since one in four families in the UK owns a dog, and nearly half of all families have a pet (PFMA, 2014), it is no surprise that questions about dogs and pets in fostering and adoption are commonplace, and this Good Practice Guide aims to provide advice for social workers, foster carers, adopters, and panel members. The main focus is on dogs, and the guide includes information about the advantages and challenges of owning dogs when fostering or adopting, matters for consideration in assessment, and advice about managing issues that might arise during placement. The guide also looks at the relevance of other pets in fostering and adoption, and provides both general principles and specific information that may be helpful.

Attitudes to dogs and pets vary considerably. For some people, dogs are “man’s best friend”; significant family members bringing loyalty and friendship that have huge benefits for the health and well-being of people. It is also generally recognised that dogs can perform useful tasks for humans in traditional working roles, and increasingly in a range of therapeutic contexts. For others, however, dogs are potentially dangerous animals primarily associated with injury and disease; noisy nuisances responsible for fouling public spaces and intimidating people. Attitudes to other animals, particularly pets like rodents and reptiles, can also invoke strong feelings, both positive and negative.

People’s attitudes will be influenced by various factors, including culture, belief system, and previous individual experience, and the issues arising from this can be played out in fostering and adoption contexts where dogs and other pets are involved. It is important to be mindful of this so that judgements do not unfairly characterise people as oversentimental with a “substitute child”, or alternatively as hard-hearted individuals whose attitudes are incompatible with providing sensitive empathic care to children. It is also important to recognise and respect minority perspectives in relation to living with dogs or other pets.

Some politicians and high profile figures have publicly mocked social workers for an excessive interest in and caution around the issue of pets and dogs in adoption, for example, with references to a ‘bloated’ assessment process characterised by a ‘six page dog assessment’ (Gove, 2011). However, news stories report dogs biting children, often in family homes, and children have been bitten by adopters’ and foster

carers' dogs. Other children have experienced placement disruptions because of issues relating to animals in the home, and they might feel that a thorough consideration of this aspect of the family is time well spent. The contributions from adopters, foster carers and social workers throughout this practice guide should serve to illustrate this point.

This practice guide has been developed alongside an assessment form for dogs (Appendix A) and an assessment form for other pets (Appendix B). Completed examples of these forms are included in this book as Appendices C and D. Sample forms are also available in the members' section of the CoramBAAF website (www.corambaaf.org.uk). The forms are provided free to all licence holders of CoramBAAF's fostering and adoption assessment forms.

This guide is also intended to be helpful in assisting fostering services and adoption agencies to develop carefully considered, logical and proportionate policies in relation to dogs and other pets. Although the guide is written specifically in relation to fostering and adoption, it will apply equally to other legal arrangements such as special guardianship.