

Short breaks and Covid-19

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The public health measures set out by the Government are intended to minimise the spread of Covid-19/coronavirus. All of us (including foster care households) and those with whom we have contact must be kept safe. In practice, this has meant that opportunities for time away from family life have been greatly reduced. As we enter into the winter months, arranging much needed breaks from family life continues to be challenging.

Short breaks are a recognised element in fostering, and have been referred to as “respite” or “child-care” (see ‘Note on terminology’). Short breaks refer to situations where children in foster care are looked after by trusted adults on a temporary basis for a short period of time that can vary from hours to days, or sometimes weeks. These arrangements can be a crucial part of an approach that supports and sustains relationships, maintains the stability and security of the placement for children, and enhances family well-being.

On 4 November 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) published guidance in respect of the national restrictions implemented on 5 November to control the spread of Covid-19. This guidance addressed key areas of education, childcare and children’s social care settings, and set out a series of exemptions. On 16 November, the guidance was updated to include short breaks.

All looked after children and all disabled children and their families can continue to make use of respite care (also known as short break services).

[Department for Education](#)

We anticipate that short breaks will continue to be allowed under any further restrictions. We would encourage the sector to think proactively and creatively about how it can support carers to provide the best care for children and to prevent carers becoming overwhelmed. All children get the very best care when carers have ongoing support, rest and space for reflection. Children enjoy time out when arrangements are made with trusted adults and when their views and feelings are at the forefront of decision making. Everyone can benefit from periods apart when arrangements are well managed and relationship-based.

Many factors have to be considered within a balanced and detailed risk assessment when making such arrangements, taking into account the risks associated with Covid-19 to the households involved. These need to be subject to review if and when circumstances change. Blanket bans on short breaks are not child-centred or supported under the latest regulations and guidance. The situation continues to evolve and we will endeavour to keep our advice updated.

Note on terminology

The term “respite” has been challenged by the disability rights movement and young people who have had experience of care (see [Language that Cares, 2019](#)). Recently, the [Scottish Care Review](#) has committed to ending its use, noting that young people strongly object to the term: ‘respite has felt stigmatising and scary. It must never feel like a dumping ground where children are put when carers cannot cope’ (p.10). In response to these critiques, we have chosen to use the term “short break” in this paper. The term “respite” continues to be used in the guidance.