

Respite care and Covid-19

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Respite care can be a crucial part of an approach that supports relationships and enhances family well-being, especially where a child or young person brings particular issues resulting from their special needs. Currently, informal opportunities for respite are greatly reduced as we enter into the summer holidays with a lack of holiday clubs and childcare facilities. Family members who might have helped with childcare may be self-isolating, and existing support networks might not be available. Single carers may be particularly affected and their support needs may be significant.

This brief note discusses the current context, the legal framework and key principles in relation to respite care. Primarily, all respite care arrangements should be child-centred and relationship-based. The risk and protective factors associated with making such arrangements must be identified and explicitly addressed. Of equal importance is the identification of the risks associated with not arranging respite care – for the child, the carer and the placement.

The public health measures set out by the Government are intended to minimise the risk of being infected by Covid-19. Each member of a foster care household and those with whom they have contact must be kept as safe as possible. In every foster care placement, there must be an explicit identification of any individual risk factors, with an agreed and explicit support plan to ensure that the safety, welfare and needs of both the foster carer/s and the child are met.

What arrangements are permissible?

Respite arrangements were not possible under the initial Covid-19 public health measures, but the easing of restrictions means that they can now take place in England, other than in areas subject to local lockdown. Arrangements made between two households are compliant with the Government's latest public health announcements in relation to Covid-19. The latest guidance for England (as of 31 July 2020) specifies that you should not:

- socialise indoors in groups of more than two households (anyone in your support bubble counts as one household);
- stay overnight away from your home with members of more than one other household (your support bubble counts as one household).

These guidelines mean that socialising and staying with one other household is permissible and therefore respite arrangements (involving one other household) can take place, subject to the necessary risk assessments. For these purposes, the concept of a “support bubble” is not relevant.

What principles should underpin decision-making?

Respite care can be crucial, helping carers ‘rest and recharge their batteries [providing carers with an] opportunity to stand back and regain perspective’ (Ottaway and Selwyn, 2016). All arrangements should be considered in relation to individual circumstances.

The following principles can help guide decision making:

- Respite arrangements need to be relationship-based and child-centred, and should not be seen as a “right” of foster carers.
- Children should be consulted and involved in decision making about any respite arrangements, according to their age and understanding.
- Carers should not be judged as failing or not coping if they request respite, and some carers may need to be encouraged to take respite.
- A comprehensive risk assessment for both households, taking into account any local restrictions, needs to be carried out and regularly reviewed.
- Wherever possible, arrangements should be made using carers who know each other and who know the child.
- In considering the risks of making respite arrangements, the specific care plan for the child will need to be taken into account.
- The fostering service will need to mitigate risks as fully as possible in all circumstances.
- Blanket policies of minimum and maximum periods of respite are not acceptable (or warranted) as they fail to be responsive to individual needs.

Summary

The Covid-19 crisis has focused attention on “risk” and has forced the sector to creatively adapt practice to mitigate the health risks to children, carers and practitioners. This is the case in relation to respite care, where the need to mitigate risk in relation to the virus needs to be balanced with the need to ensure that foster carers are supported and enabled to continue to offer stable placements for children in care.

Caring for children who have experienced abuse, trauma and family separation is challenging and support is vital. Following months of “lockdown”, carers may be fatigued and some placements may be at risk. Respite care can make a positive contribution in this regard. Enhancing the capacity of carers to meet the needs of children must be a priority for the sector. The realities of Covid-19 and the risk that it poses have to be considered within a balanced and detailed risk assessment. Current Government guidelines allows arrangements to take place in areas not subject to local lockdowns.

References

Cabinet Office (2020) *Coronavirus Outbreak FAQs: What you can and can't do*, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do

Ottaway H and Selwyn J (2016) *'No one told us it was going to be like this': Compassion fatigue and foster carers summary report*, available at: https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/93705261/Compassion_fatigue_and_foster_carers_research_summary.pdf