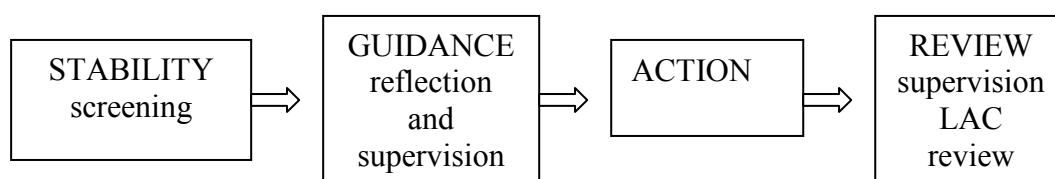


S T A B I L I T Y

Guidance Notes

These guidance notes are designed to be used in combination with the STABILITY Tool Checklist. They are intended to provide a framework for social workers to think about placement stability in context of care planning and supervision.



In each section of the guidance notes, suggestions are provided to assist in the planning of interventions that are likely to affect the stability of a placement. Suggestions for interventions are put forward in relation to stability factors that it is possible for social workers to directly influence.

The term “foster carer” has been used throughout the guidance notes to represent any adult that may be providing care for the child or young person. It is hoped these guidelines could benefit foster carers, kinship carers, residential workers and keyworkers alike.

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1. RISK FACTORS

CHILD FACTORS

1.1 AGE

While it is not possible to influence these factors directly, careful planning can prevent/reduce these risk factors from affecting placement stability. Consider:

For older children/teenagers, do they have access to a mentor?

Action: If not, consider options for mentoring and other means of promoting involvement in sports, music projects and other valued activities, which are known to be protective against placement breakdown.

1.2 EXTERNALISING BEHAVIOUR

If a child/young person shows externalising behaviour problems such as such as marked noncompliance, aggression toward peers, high activity levels, impulsivity and/or criminal offending, then consider:

Has the foster carer been informed about the nature of the child/young person's behaviour problems, and/or ways of managing these?

Action: If not, provide relevant details. Foster carers place a high value on being provided with as much information as possible about a child/young person's difficulties. Information about appropriate behaviour management strategies can be accessed from a foster carer's Supervising Social Worker. In addition, support from other agencies including IFA, Fostering and Adoption Team, or CLAMHS (extension 68562) can advise a referral to Fostering Changes is appropriate.

Are the behavioural difficulties indicative of emotional distress or underlying hyperactivity/attention problems?

Action: A consultation or a referral to CLAMHS / CAMHS for assessment/therapeutic input may be helpful. In addition, schools can often provide guidance to young people who are struggling with aggression and frustration. If the child/young person is in YOS, they may be able to access the YOS CAMHS team (extension 62601).

Is the child/young person involved with gangs or exhibiting other high-risk/antisocial behaviour?

Action: If the young person is known to be associating with gangs, then a referral or consultation to Young and Safe may be appropriate (extension 62159). Also consider a referral to the Risky Behaviour Panel or the YOS Risk Management Panel.

Does the foster carer have any concerns about potential risks to themselves or their family?

Action: If yes, this can be a trigger for ending placements. It is therefore important to give foster carers the opportunity to voice any misgivings about the child/young person's behaviour. Careful planning around risk management can give the foster carer confidence in managing risky behaviour. Also consider a Placement Support Meeting (chaired by the child's IRO) to allow for strategic planning about placement needs (extension 68521).

1.3 MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS/ABUSE

If a child/young person has a past/present history of mental health problems, or a history of abuse/neglect, then consider:

Have they been in contact with CAMHS or CLAMHS previously?

Action: If not, a referral to these services could help the child to access psychological assessment and treatment that improves their functioning and quality of life. The foster carer can also access support from CLAMHS in relation to their child or young person.

Does the child/young person have undiagnosed or not yet assessed difficulties such as special educational needs, communication difficulties, cognitive deficits?

Action: If you believe this is a possibility, check Framework for previous assessments and then contact CLAMHS or the child/young person's school for advice and discussion.

For further consideration: There are strong links between unresolved experiences of trauma/childhood abuse and future mental health difficulties, as well as problems in building and maintaining relationships.

1.4 CHILD/YOUNG PERSON'S PERCEPTION OF PLACEMENT

To promote positive relationships between a child/young person and their foster carer(s), consider:

If the placement is recent, how does the child/young person feel about being in a new placement? Are they detached/pessimistic OR hopeful/looking forward to a fresh start?

Action: A child/young person needs to feel safe in order to settle; clear information should be shared with the child/young person about their arrival and permanence. How this is done will depend upon age and understanding of the child/young person. Detailed information should also be provided to the foster carer, so that they are well informed about a child/young person's needs and potential difficulties that may arise during the placement.

For further consideration: A clear placement plan will aid the foster carer in providing effective care.

Has the child/young person moved school and/or moved away from their friends at the same time as changing placement?

Action: If yes, plans for maintaining positive contacts with their social network may increase the child/young person's commitment to the placement (e.g. encouragement to write letters or cards to their friends in previous schools).

To what extent does the child/young person feel a part of the foster family?

Action: Prompting foster carers to organise family meetings and take a generally warm, inviting and inclusive approach may strengthen a child/young person's sense of safety within a new family. A child/young person's loyalty to their birth family is also likely to affect their commitment, and should be discussed with the child/young person, birth parent(s) and foster carer(s).

Has the child/young person experienced residential care?

Action: Children and young people who have had experience of residential care often experience multiple placement moves. This can be because they are having a planned move into semi-independence, but can be because they find it hard to settle in a placement and push boundaries. Young people may benefit from an increase in one to one hours with a specialist keyworker who has experience of supporting hard to reach young people with complex needs. They also benefit from a Social Worker who is very active and consistent in engaging them in education and other agencies.

BIRTH FAMILY FACTORS

1.5 PARENTAL SUBSTANCE MISUSE/ALCOHOL ABUSE

If the mother was misusing substances while pregnant, it is possible that the child/young person might have neurodevelopmental problems. While not directly related to placement stability itself, these kinds of difficulties may present problems for the child/young person and their foster carer(s). Consider:

Is there evidence that a child/young person's mother had substance abuse problems during pregnancy?

Action: If yes, seek specialist advice from the LAC Medical team (0203 049 5974), CLAMHS (extension 68562) or CAMHS Neurodevelopmental Team (0203 049 5260) so that neurodevelopmental problems can be identified and appropriate interventions can be discussed.

Does parental substance misuse impact on contact?

Action: If yes, does this need to be addressed with legal services/contact supervisor?

1.6 CRIMINALITY

While it is not possible to influence these factors directly, careful planning can prevent/reduce these risk factors from affecting placement stability. Consider:

For older children/teenagers, do they have access to a mentor?

Action: If not, consider options for mentoring and other means of promoting involvement in valued activities, which are known to be protective against placement breakdown. For young people whose families have links with gangs, or are involved themselves consider a consultation with Young and Safe (Extension 62159)

1.7 DEATH OF PARENT

Consider:

Is the child/young person showing signs of unresolved grief?

Action: Discussion with CLAMHS duty may be indicated. There is also a national bereavement service which offers advice about loss. This is called Cruse and information about local services can be found at <http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk>.

PLACEMENT FACTORS

1.8 SIBLINGS

The impacts of separation from siblings will vary between children. When a child/young person has previously held a care-giving role, separation can be particularly distressing due to anxiety about their sibling's well-being. On the other hand, it may be appropriate to place siblings apart when one sibling poses a serious risk to the other(s).

If a child has been separated from their sibling, then consider:

Is the child/young person satisfied with the frequency and quality of contact arrangements with their sibling(s)?

Action: If not, confusion or uncertainty about contact can be reduced by the child/young person having clear guidelines about when and where sibling contact will take place. It may be necessary for this to be shared in an age-appropriate manner (e.g. visual calendar). Life Story work can help the child/young person develop a clear narrative about their family history and can raise helpful questions about their brothers and sisters.

1.9 OTHER CHILDREN IN PLACEMENT

Other children being present at a placement can influence stability in a variety of ways, and will require careful planning on an individual basis. Consider:

Is there already another foster child in the foster home?

Action: The arrival of new foster children can be unsettling for a child who is already in the placement. It is important to have an open discussion with the foster carer about how a child/young person has been in previous settings, so that the foster carer can plan ahead in regards to managing unusual or difficult behaviour, and anticipate potential impacts for newly arrived/previously settled foster children. If the new foster child is a baby, this can impact on the amount of time a foster carer is able to engage with the original foster child, and can raise anxieties for the foster child around being abandoned, replaced or less important.

Does the foster carer have any of their own children living at home?

Action: Encourage foster carers to prepare their own child(ren) and explain to them how they have an important contribution to make. It can also be helpful for foster carers to discuss some of the challenges and benefits associated with another child

joining their family (e.g. benefits: chance to make a new friend; challenges: sharing toys, being a role model and at times needing to take the back seat).

FOSTER CARER FACTORS

1.10 FOSTER CARER EXPECTATIONS

When foster carers have high or unrealistic expectations (e.g. in terms of the gratitude they receive from a child/young person), and these expectations are not met, this can cause considerable distress, tension and can lead foster carers to end a placement. Consider:

What does the foster carer expect from the child/young person? Are the foster carer's goals attainable?

Action: Discuss the foster carer's expectations about fostering in general, and this child/young person in particular, exploring whether their expectations are realistic and accurate.

Is there a clear placement plan and has it been reviewed?

Action: Regardless of the length of placement, consider whether it is a good match and raise any concerns in supervision.

What does the foster carer need to know about possible behaviour difficulties in order to manage them more effectively?

Action: If the foster carer needs assistance with managing the child's behaviour, their Supervising Social Worker will be best placed to provide advice and guidance. If the difficulties are more complex, you may want to consider a referral to CLAMHS for Fostering Changes (see 1.2 above) or further training via the Fostering Agency/ Team.

1.11 FOSTER CARER STRESS

Stressful life events can impact negatively on a foster carer's mental health, or otherwise impair their motivation/ability to look after the child(ren) in their care. Consider:

Has the foster carer experienced significant stressful life events before/during the placement?

Action: If yes, discuss with foster carers whether they might require additional

support (e.g. from their link worker, accessing respite care). If there are adverse changes in a foster carer's personal circumstances, this may warrant a Placement Support Meeting chaired by the child's IRO. The extent to which foster carers are open about difficulties may be dependent upon the quality of the relationship with the social worker or supervising social worker.

RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

1.12 FOSTER CARER – SOCIAL WORKER

To develop and maintain a purposeful working relationship with a child/young person's foster carer(s), consider:

Does the foster carer appear satisfied with our working relationship?

Action: Ensure that foster carer's efforts are sensitively recognised, appreciated and positive contributions are reinforced. Provide opportunities for feedback on the quality of your working relationship. Discuss any difficulties in the relationship within supervision, and agree a plan for them to be discussed in an open and constructive way with the foster carer.

Is the foster carer's work deserving of formal recognition?

Action: Consider recognising a foster carer's good work by nominating them for a foster carer award facilitated by the Lambeth adoption and fostering service.

1.13 FOSTER CARER – CHILD

The relationship between the child and their foster carer is fundamental to placement stability. Ultimately if the child feels safe and important, the placement is more likely to contain any difficulties that arise rather than buckle under the pressure. Some points to consider:

Does the foster carer spend enough quality time with the child?

Is the foster carer-child relationship defined by emotional warmth, understanding and clear boundaries?

Action: If not, the foster carer may benefit from further training and advice. This may require increased support from the Supervising Social Worker, Fostering agency Training, or possible referral to Fostering Changes via CLAMHS.

1.14 CHILD – BIRTH PARENT

Difficulties in contact between the birth parent(s) and foster child can be distressing to the child/young person and also create relationship difficulties with the foster carer. Consider:

Are there any difficulties around contact with the birth parent(s) (e.g. related to parental mental health, substance misuse parent's relationship with social care, inconsistent and unreliable attendance, deliberate sabotaging of the placement)?

Does the foster carer know how to manage with these difficulties sensitively with the child/young person?

Action: Develop the foster carer's awareness of the potentially damaging effects of discussing conflicts in front of the child/young person. Life Story work can help the child develop a coherent narrative about their past and why they are in care.

Does the foster carer have relevant knowledge about parental mental health without breaking the parents' confidentiality?

Action: Discuss any needs with Supervising Social Worker and foster carer.

Are there any differences in the child's behaviour pre- and post-birth parent contact?

Action: Review observations made by the contact supervisor, looking for indications that the child/young person may be distressed by contact with parent(s). Share any concerns about contact with your department practice manager or your supervisor.

2. PROTECTIVE FACTORS

CHILD FACTORS

2.1 BUILDING A CHILD/YOUNG PERSON'S RESILIENCE: EDUCATION, SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEISURE/INTERESTS

Participation in education and valued leisure/vocational activities can not only strengthen placements, but can also build a child/young person's resilience and independence. Therefore consider:

Does the child/young person have sufficient opportunities to access leisure activities?

Action: If not, provide information and facilitate engagement with after-school clubs, local authority organised activities and non-school clubs. Discuss how the foster carer can help the child to positively engage in and sustain involvement in activities. The foster carer may need to join the child/young person initially.

For older children, are there any vocational opportunities in which s/he is interested and could be supported?

Action: Provide information about suitable opportunities, and consider whether any specific support/liaison may be required in order to facilitate attendance.

To what extent is the child/young person participating and achieving in education?

Action: Work with the foster carer and liaise with education providers to obtain an accurate impression of a child/young person's academic abilities and attainment. Ensure that the foster carer and child/young person have agreed a set of achievable goals for educational attainment, with a plan to celebrate when these goals are reached.

Are there any unidentified educational needs that would benefit from further assessment or support?

Action: Is a Statement of Special Educational Needs indicated? Is the child's young person's Personal Education Plan up to date or need reviewing? Would it be helpful to consult with the child/ young person's teacher to ensure educational support is in place and is being used effectively?

FOSTER CARER FACTORS

2.2 FOSTER CARER FAMILY SUPPORT/SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support from within and outside foster families can strengthen placement stability. Consider:

Does the foster carer/family have adequate social support?

Action: Some foster carers can find it difficult to seek support in case it might be perceived as a sign of not coping. If this is thought to be the case, emphasise the importance of maintaining/building social support networks. This can be accompanied with information about foster carer networking and peer support groups (e.g. Lambeth FC, Independent Agency groups, BAAF). The Fostering

Network national website is a useful resource for various aspects of foster carer support <http://www.fostering.net>

Does the foster carer have a supportive partner?

Action: In placements with two foster parents, consider ways of ensuring that the foster carers feel supported by one another. In particular, promoting the involvement of male foster carers can be of considerable importance in providing male role models for foster children.

2.3 FOSTER CARER PARENTING ABILITY

Positive parenting skills (e.g. effective boundary setting, communication, use of praise and rewards) are likely to strengthen a placement. Therefore consider:

Is the foster carer inexperienced or otherwise seeking to develop their parenting skills?

Action: If yes, Lambeth and partner agencies provide training around the needs of LAC and foster carers. Options include in-house training, agency training accessed via Supervising Social Workers and Fostering Changes run by CLAMHS (see 1.2 above).

RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

2.4 ROLE MODELS

Positive role models can boost a child/young person's confidence by providing encouragement, structure and friendship. This type of relationship can also support the stability of a placement.

Does the child/young person have access to positive role models?

Action: If not, consider referral to local community organisations, after school clubs and local authority organised activities that can provide opportunities for children to come into contact with positive role models(

2.5 POSITIVE CHILD-SOCIAL WORKER RELATIONSHIP

The quality of the direct relationship between a social worker and child/young person can also make an important difference to placement stability. A consistent relationship with a social worker characterised by openness, reassurance, reliability

and kindness is likely to promote a child/young person's sense of importance and self-confidence. The child/young person's beliefs about entry into care can also influence the quality of this working relationship. Therefore consider:

To what extent does the child/young person appear motivated to engage with me?

Action: Including the child/young person in decision making, offering explicit reassurance and demonstrating acts of kindness can all contribute to developing a good relationship with a foster child. Overt criticism and disagreements will undermine the relationship.

Are the child/young person's beliefs about entering care possibly impacting on our working relationship?

Action: A child/young person who feels that they have been 'given away', 'taken away' or feel personally responsible for being in care may be less willing to engage. In such cases, continue with Life Story work to help the child/young person develop a clearer understanding of why they are in care.

Has the child/young person experienced multiple social workers?

Action: It is important to be empathic with the child/ young person and aware that it may be difficult for them to build a relationship with you due to having met many social workers. If you are moving on or the child is being allocated a new social worker, it is important that the ending or transition is marked with an event. This could be a card and/or outing.