

Guidance on Pets in Fostering Households

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Document Author: Professional Adviser for Fostering

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Document Summary

This document intends to provide general guidance regarding a ‘normal’ or ‘standard’ pet that a family is likely to have; such as dogs, cats, rabbits and so on. It is informed by the CoramBAAF publication - ***Dogs and Pets in Fostering and Adoption (2020)***.

It should be used by:

- social workers and their managers in fostering and fieldwork services,
- foster carers - kinship and mainstream foster carers.

The information should also be made available to children and young people so they can understand how the fostering service aims to ensure they are safe with any pets in their foster home. This guidance will also explore the possibility of a child or young people in care bringing their own pet with them, into the foster home. .

For information on pets that may present specific risks, such as dangerous dogs or venomous reptiles or insects, please refer to ***Suffolk’s Fostering Service Guidance in relation to Dangerous Pets 2024*** available on the Good Practice Guide and Suffolk Fostering Website – Resource Hub.

For more information on pets such as horses or the presence of farm animals, please see the CoramBAAF publication - ***Dogs and Pets in Fostering and Adoption (2020)***.

Version Control	Reason for revision and summary of changes needed	Date

If requested, we will translate this policy, or particular parts of it, into other languages and formats, so that everyone can use and comment upon its content.

1. Introduction

Suffolk Fostering Service recognises that any pet in a family home can have real benefit and potential therapeutic effect on a child. As Adams (2020) states: *“the childhood of many people has been enriched by the companionship and unreserved love of a dog or other pet. This is no different for children in foster homes”*.

Research by Carr and Rockett (2017) into children’s relationships with animal companions in the context of long-term foster care, found (a) that children’s relationships with animal companions satisfied attachment-related functions in their own right and (b) that animal companions helped to soften perceptions of foster caregivers, facilitating opportunities for the development of closeness.

For some children with special needs, animals can provide emotional support or act as therapy pets. The foster carer and their social worker should explore the possibility of integrating such pets, provided the animal is well-trained, calm, and suitable for the child's needs.

Overall, animals in the foster home may play an important part in helping children to find and develop secure, warm, and loving relationships. Pets can really have a positive impact on children and offer them feelings of companionship and affection.

However, it is essential that pets are taken into consideration when matching children with foster carers and some pets can also pose a risk to children. Suffolk Fostering Service, together with foster carers, need to ensure that the welfare of all children is paramount. Therefore, the assessing or supervising social worker must always consider the implications of any pet/s within the household.

2. Assessment

Where there are dogs and other pets in the household, the Pet Questionnaire on LCS should be completed on all current and newly acquired animals. In most circumstances information gathered from the carers, and social workers own observations and clarification from personal referees will be sufficient, however, if required, a second opinion may be sought from someone else within the service who has more knowledge of particular pets, or from a veterinarian or other specialist.

Information gathered regarding pets including via the LCS Pet Questionnaire will be included as part of the Form F/Kinship assessment of carers or annual review report. Appendix 1 is a *Guide to completing an assessment on a household with a dog*.

It is the duty of Suffolk Fostering Service to ensure children's safety is an ongoing matter; so any change in circumstance i.e. additional pets, loss of pets or looking after a friend's pet, must be considered by the foster carer and their social worker. The ultimate responsibility is always with the foster carer to ensure that their household (and other households they visit) remain safe environments.

A thorough assessment and sensible measures can minimise the potential risks that dogs and other pets can present to children placed in foster homes.

Whilst some pets including certain breeds of dog are generally seen as more problematic or pose a greater risk than others, it is important to assess each animal as an individual and the circumstances in which they are kept.

3. Health and hygiene

Suffolk Fostering expect all pets to be well cared for and looked after in a hygienic way. It is a legal requirement that dogs should be registered with a vet and be microchipped. They should be fully up to date with any recommended inoculations, including cats and dogs receiving regular worming and flea treatments. Their food and water must be fresh and not contaminate human food preparation areas.

Whilst risk of infection from pets is low, sensible hygiene procedures should be in place at all times, particularly if a crawling or toddler is likely to be placed.

All faeces and litter trays must be cleaned regularly and not present any risk to humans. There must be appropriate arrangements for clearing up and disposing of dog and other animal faeces from outdoor spaces accessible to children. Some animal faeces can cause disease such as that which leads to blindness.

Fostering households should not have any offensive odours resulting from owning pets. Any animal hair, feathers or other mess coming from animals should be regularly cleaned, swept or vacuumed. Hygiene risks from pets may be greater for babies and young children, or those with particular health conditions, because their immune systems are less developed.

Any potential allergies or health conditions the child may have that could be exacerbated by pet dander, fur, or saliva. For example, children with respiratory issues may be better suited to hypoallergenic pets or those with minimal shedding.

Pet food should be kept out of easy access especially from young children. Special consideration will need to be given for storage of 'live' pet food such as crickets for lizards, or maggots for fishing.

Chickens and other outdoor pets should be kept clean, and in secure accommodation. Where a number of outdoor animals are kept, such as a small holding or farm, particular reference regarding safety and supervision of children outdoors will need to be made within the assessment and health and safety policy.

The foster carer must ensure pet toys, such as small chew toys, are kept away from young children who might mistake them for their own toys, creating a choking hazard or risk of accidental ingestion.

4. Living arrangements, Training and Routines

Consideration must be given to practical arrangements for pets including which parts of the house they have access to, and the suitability of the home for the number and type of pets. Dogs should have a safe place they can be left to sleep without interference from a child and equally where they can be kept away when needed. For example, a young child or child with autism may need a quiet area free from pet interactions, while a pet may need a designated space to retreat and feel secure.

Young children may also be sensitive to noise from barking dogs or other loud pets, which could affect their sleep and overall well-being. Consider the pet's noise levels and temperament when assessing suitability for a home with a young foster child.

Some children with disabilities or special needs may have heightened sensory sensitivities. It is important to consider whether the pet's noises, fur, or movements could be distressing. Dogs that bark frequently or pets that shed excessively may not be ideal for children with sensory processing issues.

Particular consideration needs to be given to animals who are likely to enter children's rooms and sleep on their beds. Pets should not have unrestricted access to a child's sleeping areas or play spaces. As well as hygiene and allergen risk, there is an also risk of suffocation to small children, particularly by cats and small dogs. Strategies must be in place to prevent this. If an animal poses any risk, the foster carer must have a plan to either reduce or remove the risk. This must always be considered when assessing the risk to children; no compromises can be made on their safety.

Safe arrangements must be made for pets kept in tanks, aquariums, or indoor cages. For example, they must be locked to prevent risk of escape or children accessing the pet unsupervised, or the cage should be kept somewhere inaccessible to children if there is chance of them being bitten e.g. placing fingers in cages.

No child in care should be left alone at any time with a pet until the foster carer is confident that there is a positive relationship between the child and pet. Where caged pets are let out for handling this should be under supervision unless everyone is fully confident there is no risk to child or pet. A foster carer should inform their social worker of unsupervised arrangements for all pets.

It is essential that the dog or other pet is clearly under an appropriate level of control and will follow basic commands. Formal dog training can be helpful. For new carers, a dog's behaviour with children and other visitors to the house must be assessed.

5. Treatment of pets

Suffolk County Council will not tolerate any incidents of cruelty to animals and will be unlikely to assess any potential fostering applicants who have been convicted of cruelty to animals except in exceptional circumstances.

Existing foster carers who receive such a conviction will undergo a full review of their approval. This could result in termination of approval. If the service identifies cruelty to animals by any adult within the fostering household, this will be raised immediately as a concern and may result in a referral to the RSPCA and police.

Foster Child's behaviour towards a pet

Pets should be carefully selected for their temperament and behaviour around children. Some children may unintentionally provoke or frighten a pet and this may be additionally likely for a child with certain disabilities. Children with developmental delays or conditions such as autism may not easily understand or interpret an animal's signals, such as growling or tail wagging. The risk of potential aggressive response from the pet must be assessed and safety measures in place.

Children should be supported, at an age and cognitive appropriate level, to learn how to safely interact with pets and recognise warning signs. Foster carers should model and teach gentle behaviour, such as not pulling tails or ears, to help prevent accidental harm to pets or children. Appendix 2 is a *Pet Questionnaire for children* to gather the child's views on living with pets.

If the Foster Carer finds or believes that the child/young person is being cruel to the pet(s) in the household, then the child/young person's Social Worker will need to be informed as well as the Foster Carer's Supervising Social Worker.

The circumstances of any such behaviour will need to be fully explored by the social workers and carers with the child/young person. It may be that the child/young person can be taught to understand the behaviour is cruel and unacceptable. In some situations i.e. if it is believed animals will not be safe around the child, the foster placement may well need to end.

6. New Pets

Foster carers should inform their social worker if they are getting a new pet, and a new Pet Questionnaire must be completed and the Health and Safety Checklist should be updated where appropriate.

For applicants who are considering taking a new dog it would generally be expected that they fully settle the dog into the home before embarking on an assessment and introducing fostered children into the family home.

The length of time needed for a dog to settle will depend on individual circumstances such as breed, age and history of the dog and the type of fostering they plan to do. The Blue Cross recommend that it is at least 3 months for a rehomed dog to settle.

They, and an existing foster family who are thinking of getting a new dog, should consider the following:

- What sort of dog/pet would fit their terms of approval e.g. age of the children to be fostered. Consideration must also be given where carers take children in an emergency or who have more complex behaviours.
- Obtain full background information on the pet. This is essential where pets are older or from rescue/rehoming centres.
- Dogs with persistent difficulties are often rehomed and a dog may not yet have begun to show the problems that resulted in its previous rehoming.
- Seek expert advice on how to manage the pet and integration into the family home, given the fostering tasks undertaken and the needs of children in care
- Discuss the above with their assessing/ supervising social worker prior to the arrival of the pet.

7. Dangerous Pets

Suffolk Fostering Service will not accept applications from anyone who owns a pet that is registered or required to be registered under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, nor any breed of dog that is registered or required to be registered under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991/1997 except in exceptional circumstances i.e. a kinship fostering arrangement, where the pet is already established in the household.

For more detailed information, including about venomous pets (reptiles and spiders etc.) please refer to *Suffolk's Fostering Service Guidance in relation to Dangerous Pets 2024* available on the Good Practice Guide and Suffolk Fostering Website – Resource Hub.

Where a dog has been trained or used as a guard dog or police dog, there will need to be a more thorough assessment including specialist advice.

In most cases it is the temperament of the animal which should be assessed. This assessment should take into consideration whether or not the animal is protective of their owners and if they are aggressive all the time or only at certain times such as when protecting food or property.

A fostering application will not be accepted where a pet within the household has previously harmed or bitten a child or adult.

A safety assessment of all dogs in applicants' homes will be carried out and will ultimately be based on the individual animal, the carers, the type of fostering and ages and needs of children being considered.

8. Visiting Animals

The principles of this policy should apply where family and friends visit the fostering household with pets. Carers should discuss with their supervising social worker if they are considering pet sitting services or homing pets on a temporary basis. This may be incompatible with fostering, depending on the pet e.g. a dog, who will not be accustomed to the change in circumstances /environment/people.

9. Children bringing their pets to the foster home

As already stated, there are considerable benefits to children interacting with animals in the foster home and this may be especially true where the child is enabled to bring and keep their own pet. Whilst it is rare for foster children to have pets of their own, it does happen. This will most likely be a smaller pet such as a hamster or goldfish.

If a foster child does own a pet, it is important to allow them to keep it, as this most likely will provide them with comfort and stability.

However, it is acknowledged that this may not be possible i.e. where the child has a cat and the foster home has dogs; as the well-being of the pet must also be considered. This then becomes a matching issue that should be resolved before the child is placed.

In Kinship Cases, the carer may already be aware that the child has a pet and wishes to bring it with them. However, this cannot be assumed. So the child's social worker needs to be explicit about the child having a pet including when requesting a mainstream foster placement. This is so the Placements Team and Fostering Service can consider this whilst undertaking the search for a suitable foster carer.

Then, Placement Planning (PP) will need to consider how the costs of keeping a pet will be funded i.e. by Child Care Team. For example, pet insurance and veterinary bills can be expensive and beyond the scope of the Fostering allowance. aware during the placement search process. If the PP Meeting cannot take place before the child is placed with their pet, this issue must be discussed before progressing the placement, to avoid any disagreement or distress later on.

10. Annual Household and other Foster Carer Reviews

These should reconsider the issue of pets, especially dogs within the foster home. Any changes must be assessed via a new or updated Pet Questionnaire and included in the review report/paperwork.

References

Adams, P. (2020) *Dogs and Pets in Fostering and Adoption*; available from [Dogs and pets in fostering and adoption | CoramBAAF](#) Accessed 08.08.24

Carr, S. & Rockett, B. (2017) *Fostering secure attachment: experiences of animal companions in the foster home*; *Journal of Attachment and Human Development*, Volume 19 (3), 2017 - published online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2017.1280517> Accessed 08.08.24

Appendix 1

Social Worker's guide to completing an assessment on a household with a dog:

The Form F and Kinship assessment, and an assessment of all new dogs to an approved carers home, should address the following issues:

- Confirmation of what breed the dog is. If the dog is not pure bred, ask the applicant/s if anything is known of the animal's ancestry. Many dogs are wrongly identified as breeds to which they have only a passing resemblance.
- Has there ever been an incident where the dog has bitten or shown aggression?
- How does the dog respond to children and is used to having children around?
- Establish if the dog was acquired from a reputable breeder, from commercial kennels, a pet shop, a rescue centre or some other source. Most responsible breeders will know the characteristics and histories of their stock, will have used breed-specific health screening schemes to check for hereditary conditions, and will have provided guidance on rearing and training the dog.
- Older dogs acquired from rescue centres often have a history of neglect, ill treatment or abandonment. They may have established behaviour patterns as a result and careful consideration must be given to how the family will deal with a child who may have an insecure pattern of attachment, alongside a dog dealing with similar issues.
- Find out who is mainly responsible for looking after the dog. It is important that the two legged "pack leader" is identified and that they maintain the dog's routine as far as possible in the midst of the change a new child will inevitably bring.
- Determine the feeding arrangements for the dog. Is dog food kept out of reach of a child? Are dog utensils and human utensils kept separately? Is the dog allowed to beg when the humans are eating? Although the risk of infection from dogs is minimal, sensible hygiene procedures should be in place at all times, particularly if a crawling infant or toddler is being placed.
- Be clear about where the dog sleeps. Dogs need a special, safe place where they can be left in peace. Allowing a dog to sleep at the end of a child's bed or even in the child's room is inadvisable for reasons of both hygiene and safety.
- Check on exercise and "toileting" routines. Does the dog receive enough exercise to prevent boredom and any possible destructive behaviour that may result? Where is the dog permitted to relieve itself and what are the "cleaning up" arrangements?
- Obtain information on health care. Is the dog vaccinated and wormed regularly? In extremely rare cases, children can sustain eye damage if they are in direct contact with dog faeces containing the eggs of the toxocara canis worm. Regular worming eliminates this risk entirely. Coat care should be a regular activity; and routine and preventative treatment against fleas and lice is expected.
- Observe how the dog behaves when you visit. Is it overly defensive, nervous, aggressive or excessively friendly and demanding of attention? Does it respond to the owner's commands? How does the owner describe the dog's temperament, its behaviour to other visitors, children, other dogs?
- Clarify the dog's age. An elderly animal may be less able to cope with young children or less amenable given the aches and pains of ageing. A young dog may be unruly and boisterous and any child joining the family will have to be prepared for this.

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- Explore how the family will cope if, after placement, the combination of dogs and children proves untenable. Having to re-home a loved family pet can be upsetting for everyone including the incoming child who may already have suffered from losses in the past.

Further information on some of these issues may be obtainable from **referees or other people who may have visited the applicant's/carers home**, perhaps even with their own children and who may prove to be a valuable source of objective comment on any risks the dog/s may present.

Appendix 2

Example of a Foster Child's Pet Questionnaire

This questionnaire could be used by social workers and foster carers to understand the child's perspective and plan for a smoother transition into the foster home, ensuring both child and pet safety and comfort.

1. Introduction to Pets in the Home:

- How do you feel about living in a home with pets? (excited, nervous, unsure, happy)
- Have you ever lived with pets before? If yes, what kind?

2. Pet Preferences and Experiences:

- Do you have a favourite type of pet? (Examples: dog, cat, rabbit, fish)
- Are there any types of pets you are scared of or uncomfortable around? If yes, which ones?

3. Interacting with Pets:

- Do you like to play with pets? If yes, what kind of games or activities do you enjoy?
- Are there any rules you think are important when living with pets? (Examples: washing hands after touching pets, not feeding them human food)

4. Your Own Pet:

- Do you have a pet that you would like to bring with you to the foster home? If yes, what type of pet is it?
- How do you take care of your pet? (Examples: feeding, cleaning, playing)
- Is there anything you would like help with in caring for your pet?

5. Safety and Comfort:

- What would make you feel safe and comfortable living with pets in a foster home?
- Do you have any allergies to pets or concerns about cleanliness?

6. Concerns and Wishes:

- Is there anything you that worries you about living with pets in your foster home?
- Is there anything you are looking forward to about living with pets?

7. Open-Ended Feedback:

- Do you have any other thoughts or ideas about pets in your foster home that you would like to share?