A FOSTER CARER’S GUIDE TO THE BIG 5 ASKS

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# Welcome to Your Foster Carer’s Guide to the Five Big Asks

In April 2022, the Living in Care Council (LinCC) attended a training residential and agreed upon a two-year project to address 5 significant asks. These asks arose as a result of the consultation Bright Spots survey of all children looked after in Bromley, where the young people stated they felt they did not always have the same fair access to opportunities and experiences afforded to their peers not in care, which are essential for their progression into adulthood.

 **The Journey and Research**

To address these concerns, a dedicated working group was established. This group sent out questionnaires and reached out to a broad spectrum of the community, including young people in care and not in care, parents, carers, teachers, and others. The goal was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the needs and perspectives of these young people. The gathered information was compiled into this guide, designed to assist foster carers in having meaningful discussions around the five big asks with the young people in their care.

**Individualized Approach**

It is important to recognize that not all young people (YP) will ask about or want to explore all five of the big asks. Just as some YP not in care may not be interested in some of these topics, each request should be considered on an individual basis. In certain cases, the young person’s social worker (SW) or school may need to be involved, and some YP may require additional support to achieve a suitable outcome.

**Purpose of the Guide**

This guide offers helpful tips to provide equal opportunities to YP in care. By utilizing this guide alongside the peer guide created by the YP of LinCC, we aim to navigate the everyday challenges and foster a supportive environment for all YP. It is hoped that the guide will also alleviate some of the fears or concerns facing foster carers when considering the 5 big asks, as well as a reminder to review these requests annually as each young person grows in maturity and responsibility.

**The Five Big Asks**

1. **Would it be possible for me to have a Key to the house?**
2. **Would it be possible for me to have a sleepover at a friend’s house or have a friend sleep over?**
3. **Would it be possible for me to go on holiday with a friend?**
4. **Would it be possible for me to have my Mobile phone in my bedroom at night with access to the internet?**
5. **Would it be possible for me to have a pet?**

By addressing these five big asks, we can help create a more equitable and supportive environment for YP in care, enabling them to thrive and reach their full potential.

**Considerations for providing a young person with a key to the front door,**

1. **Appropriate age starting secondary school?**
	* This can vary depending on the maturity level of the young person and the context of their living situation. Generally, starting secondary school is a transitional period where children begin to take on more responsibilities, so it might be an appropriate time to consider giving them a key if they demonstrate the necessary maturity and responsibility.
2. **Length of time in placement/Trust**
	* The length of time the young person has been in their placement, or the level of trust established between them, and their caregivers can influence the decision to provide a key. It is important to ensure that the young person understands the significance of being entrusted with a key and the responsibilities that come with it. fostering open communication with the young person.
3. **Need for key?**
	* Assessing the need for a key involves considering factors such as the young person's schedule, after-school activities, and the availability of caregivers to let them into the home. If the young person is mature enough and their schedule necessitates it, providing a key could offer them greater independence and flexibility.
4. **Friend base**
	* Understanding the young person's friend base and social activities can help gauge whether they need a key to access the home when caregivers are not available. If they frequently spend time at friends' houses after school or participate in extracurricular activities, having a key may be beneficial.
5. **Finding a workaround**
	* If the young person tends to lose things or if there are concerns about trust initially, there are several strategies that can be implemented:
		+ Installing a key safe can provide a secure way for the young person to access the home without carrying a physical key.
		+ Gradually introducing responsibility by allowing the young person to have a key to let themselves in after school but not at other times, can help build trust over time.
6. **How can the young person, demonstrate responsibility?**
	* To gain trust the young person should be showing responsibility with their phone or Oyster card showing they are able to keep to boundaries i.e., being home on time letting carers know if they are running late, this would demonstrate maturity and responsibility.

In addition to these considerations, it is crucial to ensure that the young person understands their responsibilities associated with having a key, including the importance of keeping their address confidential and not displaying it on their keys. Educating them about potential dangers of sharing their address and practicing good security habits can help promote their safety and well-being. Emphasising the importance of accountability. the need for the young person to report that they have lost the key.

**Allowing sleepovers at friends’ houses**

**This involves various considerations to ensure the safety and comfort of your young person (YP). Here are some key factors to consider:**

1. **Appropriate Age**: The age of your YP is a key factor. Younger children may not be ready for sleepovers, while older children may be more independent and capable of handling overnight stays.
2. **Relationship with the Friend and Parents/Carers**: Consider how well your YP knows the friend and their parents or carers. If they have a good relationship and you trust the parents, as the carer you need to be confident in allowing the sleepover.
3. **Previous Experience**: Has your YP stayed away from home before, such as on a school trip or at a relative's house? Their past experiences with overnight stays can give you insight into how they might manage a sleepover at a friend's house.
4. **Sleeping Habits**: Consider your YP's typical sleeping habits. Do they usually wake up during the night or have any specific sleep requirements? This can help you assess whether they will be comfortable sleeping in an unfamiliar environment.
5. **Location and Availability**: Think about where you will be during the sleepover. Will you be reachable in case of an emergency? Can you easily pick up your YP if needed?
6. **Consent from the YP social worker:** In some cases there may be a requirement for the YP social worker to give consent, it is always good practice to work in partnership with the YP social worker and to ask if unsure, YP with long term partners that request to stay over should be reviewed with the YP social worker as *safeguards and risk assessments will need to be in place.*

Before allowing the sleepover, it is essential to communicate with the friend's parents or carers. Here are some things to discuss:

1. **Sleeping Arrangements**: Ensure you know where your YP will be sleeping and if there are any other children staying over. Make sure the sleeping area is safe and appropriate for your YP's age.
2. **Adult Supervision**: Inquire about the presence of other adults in the house during the sleepover. Knowing that responsible adults will be present can provide reassurance. Are you confident that your YP knows how to raise an alarm or who to talk to if they felt they wanted to go home or feel unsafe.
3. **Emergency Plans**: Discuss what would happen in case of an emergency. Make sure the parents or carers have your contact information and know how to reach you. Ask for the parent or carer to update during the evening.
4. **Requirements for DBS Checks**: we need to consider the circumstances as a DBS may not always be required, communication with the child social worker will help decide, as the foster carer and the link between the YP and the host family it would be expected in the first instance to seek consent of the host family for the check to be completed.

By considering these factors and having open communication with the YP and the YP friend's parents or carers, you can make an informed decision about whether a sleepover is appropriate for your young person. Ultimately the goal is to ensure your YP feels confident and comfortable during the sleepover experience.

The considerations for allowing sleepovers differ between primary school children and teenagers, and there are additional factors to consider for each age group.

For primary school children, since you often know the children and parents more closely, it is easier to assess the situation and make decisions accordingly. However, it is important to recognise that sometimes it may not be possible for the sleepover to happen due to several reasons, whether it is your own readiness, your YP readiness, or other circumstances. In such cases, offering to host the sleepover at your own house can be a compromise.

For teenagers, where you may not know the parents or the friend as well, it becomes crucial to ensure that there's responsible adult supervision and clear communication about the sleepover arrangements. Trust and communication with your teenager are key. The young person should be prepared to agree to conditions or demonstrate trust before being given the privilege of a sleepover:

1. **Clear Communication**: They should be upfront about where the sleepover will take place, who will be there, and what activities are planned. If they are going out before the sleepover, they should inform you of their plans.
2. **Responsibility and Maturity**: They need to demonstrate maturity and responsibility by keeping to boundaries, such as being home on time and letting you know if they will be late.
3. **Safety Measures**: Agreeing on a safe word or phrase to use if they want to come home for any reason is important. This ensures they can communicate their discomfort or need to leave without feeling awkward or pressured.
4. **Compromise and Flexibility**: Sometimes, compromises need to be made on both sides. If a sleepover is not possible for various reasons, exploring alternatives like hosting it at your house or setting goals for trust and responsibility can be beneficial.

Overall, ensuring open communication, trust, and safety measures are in place are essential for allowing sleepovers, regardless of the age group.

**Guidelines for Holiday Stay with Friend's Family**

Sleepover guidelines form the first part of this guide.

1. Family Relationship Establishment: It is crucial that a relationship with the friend's family has been established through prior sleepovers. This includes both the friend staying with the foster parents and the YP staying with the friend's family.

2. Holiday Request Form: Before approval, a holiday request form must be completed. This form should include the names of the friend's family, their home address, the names, and address of any other adults going on the Holiday and confirmation of the holiday booking.

3. Funding Confirmation: Funding for the holiday must be confirmed before any agreement is given. This ensures that financial arrangements are in place to support the youth during the trip.

4. Approval Process: Agreement for the holiday should not solely rely on the foster parent's decision. Instead, it should be made by the support team around the YP, ensuring comprehensive consideration of the YP best interests.

5. Background Checks: The responsibility lies with the service to determine whether DBS or police checks are required for the individuals involved in hosting the YP during the holiday.

These guidelines aim to ensure the safety and well-being of the YP while fostering positive relationships and experiences.

**The use of electronic devices, particularly mobile phones, before bedtime and during the night**

1. Sleep Hygiene: Research suggests that the use of electronic devices before bedtime can negatively affect sleep quality. While some argue that electronic use before sleep is aligned to reading a book. individual experiences may vary, and some individuals may not be adversely affected by electronic use before sleep.

2. Self-Regulation: It is essential to consider the ability of YP to self-regulate their electronic device usage. Factors such as age, maturity, and trustworthiness play a significant role in determining whether a YP can responsibly manage their device usage, including turning off or silencing their phone at a reasonable time.

3. Communication and Trust: Open communication between parents and YP is crucial in addressing concerns about mobile phone usage. Carers should explore the reasons behind a young person's request to keep their phone in the bedroom overnight and discuss potential compromises or solutions.

4. Risk Awareness: Carers should educate young people about the potential risks associated with excessive device usage, such as exposure to inappropriate content, online safety concerns, and the hazards of charging phones on the bed overnight.

Strategies for Managing Mobile Phone Usage:

**Appropriate age for a mobile phone,**

This can vary depending on the maturity level of the young person and the context of their living situation. Generally, starting secondary school is a transitional period where children begin to take on more responsibilities, so it might be an appropriate time to consider allowing a mobile phone and helping them to self-regulate the usage of their devices.

1. Establish House Rules: Set clear guidelines regarding mobile phone usage, including designated times for device use and limitations on phone use in the bedroom overnight include the YP person in setting these guidelines to achieve maximum buy-in.

2. Foster Self-Regulation: Encourage YP to demonstrate their ability to self-regulate their device usage by adhering to agreed-upon rules and demonstrating responsible behaviour, such as limiting screen time and prioritizing other activities.

3. Consider Parental Controls: Explore the option of using parental control apps or features to monitor and manage a young person's device usage, particularly if trust or self-regulation issues persist.

4. Trial Period and Compromise: Consider implementing a trial period to assess the impact of allowing mobile phones in the bedroom overnight and be open to negotiating compromises based on mutual agreement and trust-building efforts.

While there may be no compelling reason for young people to keep their mobile phones in the bedroom overnight, managing electronic device usage is a valuable life skill that everyone needs to learn. By fostering open communication, establishing clear guidelines, and promoting responsible behaviour, carers can help young people develop healthy habits and navigate the digital world safely and responsibly.

**Introduction and care of pets for young people in foster care.**

It is evident that the question of pets is deeply personal and requires careful attention to ensure the well-being of both the young person and the pet. There are three main scenarios in which pets may be introduced into the household:

A. YP bringing a pet with them when they first enter care.

B. YP moving with a pet to a new foster placement with the carer’s permission.

C. Carer agreeing for the YP to have a pet while in their care.

Each scenario presents unique challenges and questions that require thoughtful consideration and planning:

1. Risk Assessments: Will external bodies, such as charities or animal shelters, be involved to assess the temperament and health of the pet? Who will cover the costs associated with these assessments?

2. Ongoing Care Costs: Who will be responsible for the ongoing costs of food, vet bills, insurance, and boarding/kennelling if the family goes away?

3. Plan for Pet if YP Moves On: What is the plan if the YP moves on from foster care and is unable to take the pet with them? Who will assume responsibility for the pet's care?

In scenario C, where the carer agrees for the YP to have a pet, additional questions arise regarding ownership and responsibility:

1. Ownership and Responsibility: Whose pet, is it? Who is responsible for the ongoing care costs, and is the pet considered a family pet or the YP's personal pet?

2. Pet Care Upon YP's Departure:  What happens if the YP moves on and cannot take the pet? Will the carer assume responsibility, and what if the carer does not want the pet to leave?

These questions are crucial for ensuring the well-being of the foster Carer, YP and the pet and require clear policies and agreements in place before any pet can be put in place.