

**Prevention of Bullying Policy and Procedure**

*‘Foster carers have positive strategies for effectively supporting children where they encounter discrimination or bullying wherever this occurs’.*

*Standard 3.6 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011)*

**Adoption West’s Commitment**

We are committed to providing a caring, friendly and safe environment for all the children in our early permanence care or living in adoptive families, and to supporting children and young people who are being bullied.

Bullying of any kind is unacceptable and any incidents or disclosure will be taken seriously and allegations will be investigated. Children who are being bullied will be supported and action will be taken to prevent further incidents of bullying.

Adoption West expects that all children and young people, early permanence carers and staff will treat each other with respect and understanding.

All our carers and social workers must be alert to the possibility that bullying may occur.

Early permanence carers will be supported in their supervision to respond appropriately and in positive ways to both victims and perpetrators of bullying. Whilst bullying is often associated with what happens either within, or to and from school, we must also be alert to the possibility of bullying within the home and in the neighbourhood/community.

**Definition of Bullying**

The definition used by Adoption West is the one given by the Department for Education (2011):

‘Bullying is behaviour by an individual or group, repeated over time, that intentionally hurts another individual or group either physically or emotionally. Bullying can take many forms (for instance, cyber-bullying via text messages or the internet), and is often motivated by prejudice against particular groups, for example on grounds of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or because a child is adopted or has caring responsibilities. It might be motivated by actual differences between children, or perceived differences’.

**What is bullying?**

Bullying is the use of verbal or physical aggression with the intention of hurting another person which results in pain and distress to the victim. Though it should be noted that bullying may not always be intentional – bullying behaviour will have the same impact whether intended or not.

Bullying can take place anywhere; in school, through the internet, parks, playgrounds, clubs and on the street. Bullying can also happen in foster homes involving foster children, foster carers own children and foster carers.

Specific types of bullying include:

* bullying related to race, religion or culture
* bullying related to special educational needs or disabilities
* bullying related to appearance or health
* bullying relating to sexual orientation
* bullying relating to gender
* bullying of young carers or looked after children or otherwise related to home
* circumstances
* sexist or sexual bullying

**Why Foster Children are particularly at Risk**

Children looked after by Local Authorities are regarded as among the most vulnerable in society. Being a victim of bullying will increase a child’s vulnerability making them feel unhappy, lonely and isolated. Being a bully is equally detrimental to positive emotional development. By definition, children in foster care are different as they do not live at home with their parents; they immediately fit the profile of potential victims for the bullies. There are a number of additional common characteristics of foster children that increase their potential for being targeted:

* Many will already have been targeted and abused by others, including their primary carers
* Many will be developmentally immature
* Many will be lacking in self confidence
* Some may have experienced prior abuse or victimisation as the only time they have received attention.
* Many will be isolated from their family, peers and other support systems when they become looked after, including perhaps a change of school.
* Frequent moves may have led to a sense of insecurity and a fear or inability in developing positive relationships with peers.
* A prior lack of positive attachments.

**Why do Children and Young People Bully and who are the Bullies?**

There are many reasons why children and young people bully. Some may do it to cope with a difficult situation in their own life and others will see it as a way of gaining status from their peers. Some are just used to getting their own way and may not even recognise the effect of their actions on their victims. A number of children will become bullies as a result of being victims themselves. The reasons for some foster children becoming victims may also be the reasons for others becoming bullies. This will have potential implications for carers fostering more than one child and needs to be borne in mind if it is suspected that a foster child is being bullied.

Bullying could be as a result of:

* Low self-esteem
* Bullying may give the individual confidence
* Jealousy
* Family problems
* Having been bullied themselves
* Wanting others to feel as bad as they do
* Being abused
* Feeling unimportant and insecure
* Feeling scared
* A cry for help/attention
* Wanting to gain acceptance
* Copying others, e.g. hearing other people being called names
* to belong to a particular group or gang
* Being selfish and always wanting to get their own way
* Not understanding that bullying is wrong
* Not having learned other, better ways of mixing with their friends/peers
* Being encouraged to be a bully by their friends/peers
* Going through a difficult time and acting out aggressive feelings
* Taking out their own anger on others
* Having no friends and feeling lonely
* Not being listened to

**Signs of being Bullied**

There are a wide variety of behaviours that may indicate that a person is a victim of bullying. Many of these behaviours are the same signs and symptoms that reflect abuse, family dysfunction, trauma and family break up. When considering children in foster care, it is often very difficult to distinguish between signs and symptoms which are related to the reason for their placement and those that may indicate that they are a victim of bullying.

Signs may include:

* Sleep disturbance: nightmares, avoidance of bedtime, crying alone at night, frequent excuses for leaving the bedroom or bedwetting.
* Regression: behaving as a much younger child, thumb sucking, rocking, enhanced dependence on comforters, consistently adopting the foetal position or adopting childish writing and language.
* Withdrawal: avoidance of activities previously valued, sudden reluctance to join in groups, avoidance of contact with valued adults and peers, or avoidance of school.
* Eating Disorders: excuses to avoid mealtimes, overeating, anorexia or bulimia
* Regular unexplained illnesses: stomach pains, headaches or general debility.
* Behaviour: temper tantrums, or hitting out at close friends, family or carers, aggression, changes in routine behaviour. Begins to bully other children or siblings. Clingy.
* Self-harm: cutting self, drug and alcohol abuse or suicide attempts.
* Unexplained injuries: bruises, scratches or cuts.
* Loss of property or money/damaged possessions: where no plausible explanation is given, refusal to explain need, unrealistic demand, where no apparent benefit accrues or unlikely excuses for need.
* Stealing: shoplifting or taking possessions of family, friends and carers.
* Emotional: anxiety: nervy, twitchy, on edge, starts stammering, lack of confidence, speaking negatively about themselves.
* School: Fear of walking to or from school or of travelling by public transport, unwilling to go to school (school phobic), truanting, begins to do poorly with schoolwork.
* Running away.
* Attempts or threatens suicide/self harm.
* Is afraid to use the internet or mobile phone, is nervous or jumpy when a cyber message is received.

**These signs and behaviour could indicate other problems, but bullying should be considered a possibility and should be investigated.**

**Prevention**

Everyone involved in looking after children shares responsibility for countering bullying and for creating a culture that positively encourages acceptable behaviour and reduces or prevents the likelihood of bullying. As part of this ethos, everyone must understand what bullying means and what measures can be taken to counter it.

Early permanence carers and adopters should talk to children and young people about house rules, sanctions and expectations around behaviour. Children who have experienced a number of placement moves are understandably likely to be confused about which rules apply where, as every household is likely to differ slightly.

Every household should make it explicit that they will endeavour to protect all children in their care from being bullied and that such behaviour is unacceptable in all its forms. It should be made clear that children and young people have a responsibility to protect and care for each other. An inclusive environment in which bullying is not tolerated means early permanence carers need to:

* Encourage and model behaviour that is respectful and fair.
* Celebrate the child as an individual.
* Challenge prejudice and promote equality.
* Discourage children and young people from using bullying behaviour at home or elsewhere.
* Promote effective communication.
* Build the capacity of children and young people to develop their own resilience and strategies for preventing bullying.
* Set clear and simple rules focusing on rights and relationships. For example, ‘everyone has the right to have their concerns listened to’ and ‘no put downs’.
* Focus on good behaviour and not only on bad behaviour.
* Ensure that methods of managing children’s behaviour and sanctions do not contain any elements of bullying.
* Ensure everyone feels valued for himself/herself and is treated with kindness and respect.
* Ensure everyone feels safe from intimidation, threat or harm.
* Boost the self-esteem of the child.
* Support the child to socialise.
* Ensure the child knows how to ask for help and encourage them to talk about their worries.
* Teach the child or young person assertiveness skills and having the right to say no.
* Encourage children and young people to be part of different groups, such as sports clubs or participate in hobbies, both in and out of school.
* Work with in the child or young person’s school to promote their wellbeing.
* Spend time together.
* Talk about bullying; say it is wrong. Talk about what they could do if they or someone else felt they were being bullied.
* Talk about choices and actions in different situations; not everyone would make the same choice.
* Encourage the child to come up with ideas of how to keep safe in a range of situations. Think about the best options for them to use, which will keep themselves and others as safe as possible.
* Produce safe caring plans which include details on how incidents of bullying will be dealt with in the home.
* Be aware of the physical environment in which children are living and the images, via the television, computer games or the internet, to which they are exposed.

**Procedures**

**Allegations and Incidents of Bullying**

A clear consistent response is essential and any interventions that are applied to bullying situations must focus on making the victim feel safe, stop the bullying, change the behaviour of the bully and make it clear that bullying is unacceptable.

* Early Permanence carers should ensure that they record all suspected or actual incidents on a diary sheet and a specific incident sheet.
* Early permanence carers must report all incidents to their social worker and child’s social worker as soon as possible, but within 24 hours.
* The AW social worker, child’s social worker and the early permanence carer will formulate a plan to address concerns about bullying which should include: Who should talk to the child, who else needs to be notified (e.g. schools, birth parents) and whether any immediate action is needed to safeguard the child. Bullying may involve an allegation of crime (assault, theft, harassment) which must be reported to the Police at the earliest opportunity.
* The AW social worker will complete risk assessments on vulnerable children and young people, where there is a risk of bullying or of being bullied.
* Under the Children Act 1989 a bullying incident should be addressed as a child protection concern when there is ‘reasonable cause to suspect that a child-is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm’. The child’s social worker must consider whether the bullying constitutes significant harm and if so, follow the Child Protection and Safeguarding Procedures.
* Any incident of an early permanence carer bullying a child or young person will invoke the Child Protection and Safeguarding Procedures.
* If an early permanence carer is being bullied by a child, young person or adult, the AW social worker will look into strategies to support them, which may include, a professionals meeting to look at the best way of dealing with the bullying, additional support services and a risk assessment.
* After the concerns about bullying have been discussed with the child, and if bullying is confirmed or continues to be suspected, early permanence carers will need to work within an agreed strategy to address the bullying.
* The AW social worker must record any incidents in the early permanence carer’s records; diary sheet incident log and chronology.
* The AW social worker will inform their Hub manager as soon as possible about any incidents of bullying.
* Hub managers will ensure appropriate action has been taken and monitor the situation in future supervision sessions.
* Hub managers will record and report statistics to the Service Director when required.
* The AW social worker will discuss bullying when undertaking supervision with early permanence carers, and record details on the supervision record.
* Early Permanence carers will be supported in their supervision with the use of appropriate and positive ways of responding to both victims and perpetrators of bullying.
* Incidents of bullying and how they have been dealt with should be kept under review until everyone, including the child feel that this is no longer a cause for concern.

**Responsibilities of Adoption West**

* The assessment process of prospective carers should address attitudes, experience and understanding in relation to bullying.
* The induction and ongoing training that carers receive should include antibullying practice.
* As part of the placement planning process, consideration should be given as to whether the child may be a victim or perpetrator of bullying, or both. If there is any risk, the child’s plan must outline the concerns and strategies to be adopted to counter it.
* All children in placements approved by Adoption West will have access to, and understand the complaints procedure, if too young to do so this will be the responsibility of the child’s social worker.
* All children and young people are issued with a children’s guide which includes how to contact helplines and websites that provide support and guidance.
* If children cannot read because of age or disability, alternative methods should be used to ensure children are able to understand how to make contacts for advice.
* Early Permanence carers and AW social workers will be provided with a copy of the Anti-Bullying Policy and Procedures produced by Adoption West.
* Carers are made aware of their responsibility to report any incidence of bullying of or by a child in their care.
* Early permanence carers have access to, and understand the complaints procedure.
* The guidance and procedures will be reviewed annually and updated as necessary.

**Related Policies:**

This policy links to the following Adoption West policies. These should be referred to where relevant – this will depend on each individual case or circumstance.

* The Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy
* Managing Allegations
* The Missing Child Policy
* The Behaviour Management Policy
* The Whistleblowing Policy
* The Complaints Policy
* The Equality Policy