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Working with and caring for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in care

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| Produced By | Tracey Newcomb |

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# Acknowledgements

Much of the guide is drawn, with permission, from the work of Daniel Allen and Paul Adams, ‘Social Work with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children’ (BAAF 2013).

Informative information has also been drawn from FFT – Friends, Families and Travellers- their website, which is a helpful resource can be found at <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/>

Thanks, are also given to community members of the BME Children’s Services Forum for Poole, Bournemouth and Dorset who offered their input to produce this guide.

# Introduction

From a legal standpoint, case law in 1988 granted Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers legal status as ethnic groups. In the context of Children’s Services, the Human Rights Act 1998, Equalities Act 2010 and Children’s Act 1989 require that every child is looked after in a way that “*respects, recognises, supports and celebrates their identity”.* This includes the child’s ethnic origin and cultural background. This means that professionals and carers are required to provide individual support to ensure Gypsy and Traveller children’s cultural needs are met.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have experienced persecution, oppression and racism. This discrimination is still present in the current day perception of the communities and continues to impact on individuals through media coverage and individual interactions.

In a previous analysis of the population of ‘looked after’ children and young people in England, Dan Allen estimated that Gypsy and Traveller children were three times more likely to be taken into care than any other child. Between 2009 and 2015, there has been an increase of 733% of Gypsy or Roma children in foster care and an increase of 200% of Traveller children in foster care.

The disproportionately high presence of Gypsies and Travellers in care necessitates the promotion of an understanding of Gypsy and Traveller culture, values and norms amongst professionals involved throughout the process of safeguarding vulnerable children.

This guide should be used by social workers and carers to help them gain a broad understanding of cultural issues for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. It should help those caring for children and young people from these backgrounds to understand ways in which to support their cultural identity. The guide is not intended however, to replace discussions with individuals to understand their personal experience of their culture and experience.

This guide will inevitably make some generalisations that will not apply across all those people who identify themselves as Gypsy, Roma or Traveller. The aim of the guide is only to raise a general awareness of the culture and of the experiences of many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and not to create stereotypes.

A more detailed guide to working with these families in the context of social work can be found here – <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/news/a-guide-for-professionals-working-with-gypsies-and-travellers-in-the-public-care-system/>

# The importance of understanding culture in social work

When working with families, children and young people, it is important to recognise the factors which influence their identity. If culture is ignored practitioners miss opportunities to allow culture to support their work and create a barrier to working together with families to improve the child’s well-being. They also re-enforce the social exclusion experienced by minority groups where their particular experiences and needs are ignored.

Asking questions about an individual’s culture and traditions gives a clear message that no assumptions or judgements are being made about the family’s unique life experience and cultural traditions. It can also show a genuine interest in something that is important to the family and allow a rapport to be built.

Carers and practitioners need to reflect on their own approach to exploring cultures they come into contact with in their work. They may experience uncertainty or fear and be hesitant to approach cultural issues. This approach will not enable community engagement or a preventative approach to be taken. Challenging our own bias or stereotypes is also important.

# Looking after Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children

There is little research or material available specifically for foster carers or care workers about their role in caring for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children which is why this guide was produced locally.

The Fostering Service Statutory Guidance (2011) states:

*‘Foster carers should be supported to help individual children and young people cope if they are subject to discrimination, marginalisation or ridicule from their peers by virtue of their gender, religion, ethnic origin, cultural background, linguistic background, nationality, disability, sexual orientation or looked after status.*

*Cultural, racial, faith based or ethnic expectations about (children’s) clothes or diet should be met and supported.’*

In order for children to return to their Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities from care or as Care Leavers they need to maintain, as far as is possible, their identity and the ‘purity’ expected. This will best be achieved by maintaining links and promoting their culture. Should we do not do this, the child or young person may lose their cultural identity and consequently their support network yet still be likely to be exposed to the discrimination experienced by Gypsy, Roma, Traveller people. network.

# Observing the differences between Gypsy / Traveller / Roma

There are a number of cultures who are grouped together under the Gypsy, Traveller and Roma community. These include:

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| * Roma | * Irish travellers | * Scottish gypsies / travellers |
| * Welsh gypsies | * New travellers | * Showmen and circus people |
| * Boat people (Bargees) | * Romani gypsies |  |

It is important that service users be able to self-define their culture and that practitioners respect their preferred identity. By exploring culture and identity with service users, assumptions can be avoided and an understanding of how this influence their lives can be explored. Some service users will not want to identify themselves as Gypsy, Traveller or Roma due to experience of discrimination, but culture and identity can still be explored without needing to ‘label’ it.

Some Gypsy, Roma, Traveller families will have moved into bricks-and mortar housing and it is important to recognise that this does not mean that they are no longer part of the Gypsy, Roma Traveller culture. Many will have done this reluctantly and still travel or wish to return to a travelling life.

Romani gypsies are found across Europe and indeed the world, but will have had different experiences of how legislation and government policy treated them.

# History of oppression

It is important for carers and practitioners to understand the cultural experience that service users will ‘carry with them’ into any dealings with statutory services and why the community are suspicious of state intervention. The culture promotes self-sufficiency in order to survive.

It is essential that social workers can explain and justify the reason for concerns they have about children. Some families will perceive that concerns raised with them will be based on racism about their Gypsy, Roma, or Traveller identity. This is a clear block to being able to improve the situation for the child in partnership with their families.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people have experienced discrimination in the UK since 1562 when laws made it a capital offence to be a Gypsy. In 1572 it was lawful for Gypsy children to be ‘taken into service’. Across the 19th and 20th Century there is evidence across Europe of forced sterilisation of women, torture, imprisonment and murder to eradicate the Gypsy culture. World War II saw the holocaust of Gypsies in Europe.

Changes in legislation in 1960 led to closed access to commons and traditional stopping places for Gypsy and Traveller communities. This led to conflict between settled communities and Gypsies and Travellers as later legislation in 1968 requiring local authorities to provide sites was slow to be adopted.

Research shows that in the 1980s and 1990s there was evidence of forced removal of New Traveller children into care and in the 1980s an Irish study showed the over-representation of Traveller children in Care.

# Dealing with racism

Many children and young people face racism every day in British communities. Social workers and carers should support children to equip themselves and to feel able to talk about their experiences and develop strategies to deal with this. It is important that children and young people do not ‘internalise’ racism (think that it is their fault). Children in care from Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities have to learn to deal with being part of two communities and the additional difficulties that this may bring to them.

# Cultures, traditions and beliefs

This section will make some generalisations which people can use as a basis to understand the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller community, but note, this should not replace the understanding that should be sought in work with each individual family.

## *Nomadism*

The commonest culture that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities identify with is the tradition of nomadism or travelling. The purpose of this is generally economic survival to access work, but also to meet for marriages, christenings and funerals. Many Gypsy, Roma and Travellers will also be ‘moved on’ because of limited provision for them to use approved sites. Many families will undertake seasonal travelling, moving about more in the summer months.

Travelling has an impact of families and children accessing services, but the individuals will have ways in which they access education for children and medical care.

Some families who live in houses do continue to travel from time to time, while others do not. For those who do not travel, it does not change their identity as a Gypsy, Roma or traveller.

Gypsies, Romas and Travellers can experience a bricks and mortar house as a form of control and forced assimilation. Children experiencing this as they come into care can experience significant culture shock in this move and find it difficult to adjust to their new situation.

Families who continue to travel when their children are in care may struggle to maintain contact arrangements specified by social workers as they may not be in the area at specific dates and times. This should be considered by workers in their planning.

## *Pride in family and community*

The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community believe in the central importance of family, which includes a mutual reliance on extended family and a system of internal support. When you learn about the persecution that the community have experienced, you can understand this approach to excluding majority society. This is found in a number of minority groups. In some cases families will attend meetings and visits in groups, with older generations and adult siblings present. This is a way to offer each other mutual support and to help each other with dealing with services or settled people. Services should view this as a way to support the person experiencing difficulties and use the resources available in this group. It can be more worrying when someone from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background is not able to access help and support from within their own community.

The network of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people is broad and not based on formal family relationships. People will identify with each other through their shared experience. Practitioners and carers should not place too much emphasis on the direct relationship between people presenting as an extended family.

There are values placed on the purity of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller experience; for those who have experience outside of the culture, they can be viewed as impure and face rejection. This causes challenges for those who marry outside of the community or young people who associate too much with the majority society and for children who are brought up by carers outside of the community. For these people acceptance by the community is not easy and support networks are reduced.

Practitioners and carers should work in a way that does not ‘shame’ the family or children in front of their community. They will also want to promote pride in the community and seek out role models for the children to aspire to.

## *Privacy and attitude to authority*

Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families will consider that issues they experience are private matters and will resist outside agencies’ involvement in their lives. This relates to issues such as domestic abuse, substance misuse and ill–health. Agencies are often treated with a deep sense of mistrust, until they have proven themselves as understanding the family’s experience. Even then children and families will keep some areas of their lives private from ‘outsiders’.

When Children’s Social Care become involved this can be perceived as a ‘controlling’ intervention and is likely to be resisted. Many individuals will have known other families where children have been removed or the way in which social worker have met and talked to families has been insensitive and they will carry this anxiety with them.

Some communities will reject members who bring unwanted attention from agencies because of their behaviour. This can lead to families denying problems or keeping agency involvement a secret, for example when mental health leads to hospital admission or when children are taken into care. Unfortunately, this creates a greater sense of isolation for these families and reduces the support available to them.

## *Education*

Education of the people who identified as Gypsy or Traveller in the 2011 census of England and Wales, 60% had no formal qualifications whatsoever. This is three times higher than the national average.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are identified as one of the groups most at risk in the education system. This is influenced by a number of factors:

* nomadic lifestyle means that children will attend a number of schools, often as a ‘temporary pupil’.
* insufficient official traveller sites lead to children being moved on and therefore having to change school.
* some parents see education at secondary school level as unnecessary.
* some parents are worried that too much contact with the majority of society at school is a threat to Gypsy, Traveller and Roma culture.
* Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children can experience discrimination and bullying at school.

The reason for non-attendance at school should be explored with families as there may be ways in which it can be supported. In Romani culture, the ages of 11-14 years are a time when many young people will be kept away from the settled community to help them develop their Romani identity away from settled community influence (which can be perceived as exposure to alcohol drugs, underage sex etc).

Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are home educated or have services delivered to them at official sites.

The ability to read and write should not be assumed when working with any service user and discussion should establish the best way to communicate appointments and important messages.

## *Health*

Research tells us that Gypsy and Traveller communities have the lowest life expectancy and the highest rate of child mortality in Britain (Parry et al 2004).

Access to routine health care is managed by those who travel in a different way to the settled community and is often through emergency or drop-in services. For a child coming into care, there will be medical, dental and optician appointments and these must be managed sensitively as the child may not have experienced this availability and intensity of services before.

## *Cleanliness and Hygiene*

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller individuals have strict cultural norms around cleanliness and hygiene. They will have routines and traditions that may not be found in the majority culture, for example having separate wash bowls for different tasks, separating washing in a particular way and not using a toilet in the trailer (living accommodation). By understanding the way in which children have been brought up, elements of the same care can be adopted in the fostering household or adjustments can be made sensitively.

Children will have had the importance of these routines emphasised to them and they may find a different experience worrying and ‘unsafe’. Encouraging children to tell carers and social workers what they find ‘strange’ will help to reduce fears.

## *Language*

Some children will be able to speak Roma or other languages alongside English. Carers will need to be aware that when children are speaking together in their own language, they may be unhappy or wanting to talk about concerns privately together. Social workers and carers need to offer reassurance and a chance for children to talk about things that worry them.

## *Gender roles and separations*

In Gypsy, Roma, Traveller culture, the males are often responsible for the economic well-being of the family whilst the females are responsible for the domestic roles that support the men to work outside of the home. Ideally young males will come into the family businesses. There are challenges to the culture with women increasingly finding work outside of the domestic role and also for men being able to maintain work to support their families. These tensions can cause difficulties within families.

Modesty is a key element of the culture and boys and girls will expect to undress and sleep separately. The experience of children and young people in foster care around these issues should be explored with families in placement planning, so that cultural norms are respected and children feel ‘safe’.

Young Gypsy, Roma, Traveller women are to be seen as ‘pure’ and so any behaviour seen to be outside of this cultural norm brings shame on the family. This can lead to violence against these young women.

There are also difficulties for young people who come out as gay, lesbian or bi-sexual as this too is seen as unacceptable sexual behaviours. Having said this, acceptance of difference is changing and the expectations of individuals need to be explored to understand risks and impact.

In the context of caring for children and young people, these taboos must be understood as they children and young people will be living across two communities where acceptance of sexual behaviours differs.

## *Religion*

Many, but not all, Gypsy, Roma, Travellers have a faith, with many Irish Travellers being devout Roman Catholics and many Romani Gypsies likely to be born-again Christians. It is an area for practitioners to explore with service users, along with what their faith means for families in practical and spiritual terms. Support can be accessed through faith groups for families, so understanding networks can be important as well as maintaining faith for children in care.

# Conclusion

In conclusion there is a challenge to social workers and carers in working with different communities to safeguard children when concerns are identified, whilst using knowledge of their culture to help children in care to feel ‘safe’ and to support their identity and community membership.

This guide will hopefully have given a starting point and some areas to consider for practitioners and carers.

A local resource for practitioners can be found at <http://kushtibokdorset.co.uk/>

# References

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