

Religious Observance, Racial Origin, Cultural and Linguistic Backgrounds



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1. Introduction

The children Act 1989 requires a Local Authority to give consideration to the religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background when making any decision in respect of a child who is in care as a result of a Court Order and or Section 20. The duty to consult the child, his/her parents and others in respect of decisions also requires a willingness by all staff to pay attention and take positive action to be informed about such issues and discuss these with the child and those concerned with the child's care.

It follows that there should be clear understanding by those caring for the child of family beliefs and values if the child is to be rehabilitated with their family. Where this is not possible and alternative care is necessary the parent will continue to have **Parental Responsibility** and their views should continue to be sought. If children are to grow into adulthood with a sense of identity and confidence in themselves, they should be cared for by people who will be able to help them with issues in respect of their racial origin and religious persuasion, and be able to talk positively with them about their cultural background. A negative view of these issues and the loss of the language spoken by their parents and community will take away from children a positive image of themselves and reduce their choices in life.

These issues apply equally to white children as well as black. Nobody is without a 'culture'. However, it has to be recognised that social work has developed in a society where there are inequalities of power between white and black communities. White social workers and those caring for children have a moral and professional duty to consider to what extent their decisions and actions further disadvantage black children and families. All members of staff should support each other in being

willing to discuss their attitudes to children from a different cultural background or racial group than their own and argue for change where this is necessary, starting with individual and team behaviour.

When assessing the needs of any child it is important to avoid stereotypes and assumptions. Communities are made up of individuals who may attach different importance to beliefs, language and culture. A recourse to stereotypes is likely to ensure that a child's needs are not met. Generalisations should be avoided. It is only by spending time talking to young people and their families that their individual needs are met. We all wish to be valued as individuals and become angry when assumptions are made about us. We also are upset if some fundamental aspect of our background is ignored.

2. Religious Observance

All children placed in residential care or foster care will be enabled to attend such religious services and receive such instruction that is appropriate to their religious persuasion.

Support will be provided for children to access relevant information as may be required for residential staff/foster carers to provide for each child's religious needs.

During the admission process the child's religious and cultural background should be taken into consideration and actions should be taken as appropriate to ensure the child settles in and their religious and cultural needs are met.

Diet is also central to the beliefs and actions of many religions. All homes should have the ability to provide individual meals or to demonstrate through their menus that cultural choice is available. If necessary specific training should be available to ensure choice and diversity.

Staff should also be aware of the individual child's needs in relation to dress, hair care and hygiene. Again all specific requirements should be identified during the admission process to allow the arrangements to be made.

Staff should familiarise themselves with the central belief of different faiths and places of worship. It will be useful to identify significant people who can be asked for advice when necessary.

Attendance at religious ceremonies may be more important to some faiths than others. Arrangements should be made to ensure children are able to attend and when necessary be accompanied if they are likely to have contact with someone who might cause them difficulties. The child must feel comfortable with the person who goes with them. In the case of a child who has little or no significant contact with their family it is possible to appoint an **Independent Visitor** who may perform this role. This should be discussed, along with other issues affecting religious persuasions and cultural background, at the child's statutory review meeting and at the time of admission.

Religious observance and beliefs can be the focus for conflict between the child and their family. This can cover a range of situations such as disagreement concerning details of observance, level of commitment, loss of faith of the young person wishing to take up a totally different religion.

Staff should display sensitivity and make every effort towards resolving such situations with the help of the child's Social Worker and if possible appropriate religious and Community Leaders. As with

any conflict both sides should be encouraged to talk to each other in a supportive and safe environment in order to explore possible change and compromise.

Although efforts should be made to ensure young children continue to follow the religious beliefs and wishes of their parents, it is a requirement of the Children Act that children's wishes and feelings are taken into account. It would be appropriate to raise such issues within a statutory review setting in consultation with the child's Social Worker.

Staff should not, neither should they allow other residents, to encourage young people to conform to the beliefs held by others, either implicitly or by pressure to conform.

3. Funerals

On receiving the information that a member of the child's family has died, staff should make themselves aware of any religious or cultural observations which will be necessary and also the extent of the child's/young persons expected involvement in any ceremonies. Staff should ensure that all resources are made available to ensure the child/young person is able to attend/carry out his/her religious duties.

4. Fringe Groups/Cults

Should staff become aware of a child person becoming the focus of a group/cult they should inform their manager immediately. **Looked After** children may be particularly susceptible and vulnerable to the attractions displayed by such groups because of possibly previous negative life experiences. The home manager and social worker should be informed at the earliest opportunity so that informed discussion, and if necessary, legal advice/action can take place.

5. Racial Origin, Cultural and Linguistic Background

The cultural, racial and linguistic identities of children, their parents and carers must be respected in the development of Residential & Family Placement Services for Children and the support of the child's placement. Including consultation with the Child and their parents.

Individual staff and managers have a responsibility to encourage an anti-racist approach in day to day practice and training, and to develop practical responses to incidents of racism within the home, this applies to residents and the staff team.

Each home should develop practical ways of promoting positive images of black people, different races, cultures and religion which should be documented in the Residential Placements in their Equality Action Plan.

Information booklets, leaflets and books should be available to children showing and explaining a wide range of festivals and celebrations across the different cultures and religion.

Children should be encouraged to acknowledge and celebrate different festivals and holidays.

Staff/carers need to show increased awareness and be culturally sensitive to the child's/young persons physical care needs. Managers and staff need to ensure they are providing the correct food/diets, hair and skin products and clothing. This should be purchased and held by the individual, not shared.

Every attempt must be made to enable children to be positive about their cultural background. Language is an important part of our cultural identity. To ridicule or try to suppress the way a child speaks is a means to destroying their cultural identity.

Where English is not the first language of the child or parent an Interpreter should always be used and any documents translated.

Residential & Family Placements should ensure that their staff/carers offer a reflection of the ethnic origins of the children likely to be placed within the home. This should be done following the Local Authorities Equal Opportunities Policy.

6. Responding to Racism/Language

All incidents of racism are challenged and work is done with the person involved to instigate a change in their attitude, and to eliminate racism. This applies to children and staff.

A NON-RACIST APPROACH is not acceptable as this neutral stance does not challenge any issues, in effect it colludes with racism.

Programmes, (rewards and Sanctions) should be devised for children who are racially abusive. This may need to be ongoing as each incident needs to be challenged.

Incidents involving staff should be dealt with through supervision and/or the disciplinary process.

Language is powerful, it conveys attitudes which are usually backed up and demonstrated by behaviours. Many words and phrases commonly used are negative and reinforce the oppression of minority groups.

Everyone needs to be aware of words and phrases which cause offence or discomfort and replace them with acceptable alternatives. This challenge has to be continuous and aimed at a minimal level. If the receiver is in the slightest amount offended by the remark made by either peers or staff it should be challenged as unacceptable.

Racist and sexist language demeans and undermines black, ethnic minority people and women; there is no place for this type of language within residential and family placement services.

Supposedly "joking" and "funny" comments aimed at a particular group or individual are unacceptable if it creates uneasiness or discomfort for racial, disabled and ethnic minorities, and also women or any other disadvantaged group.

Staff should always be aware of the "messages" (hidden and open) portrayed in joking birthday cards, holiday postcards and any written messages left to read at work.