

Information leaflet

Challenging Behaviour

Children living with special guardians have often had difficult experiences during their early years and some might have feelings of loss, suffered trauma and/or have attachment issues. As a result they might behave and act in ways that are challenging and difficult for them and the special guardian to cope with.

For special guardians the way their child behaves can be confusing and difficult to manage, especially if they have not had specialist parenting training. It may also come as a surprise if they have raised children without these issues.

Research shows that how a carer reacts to difficult behaviour may be more important for a child's development than the behaviour itself. Special guardians need to think about their reactions and emotions and these are issues that professionals can usefully discuss with them.

Common ways children may behave

Children can show challenging behaviour in a number of ways from bedwetting, becoming withdrawn to acting aggressively. The cause of this behaviour is often due to attachment issues and from a lack of self-esteem.

When a child's early experiences involve neglect, abuse or poor nurturing, the acute stress they feel leads to the release of the stress hormone cortisol. This has a negative impact on the parts of the brain responsible for controlling their emotions, moods and their ability to plan and reason.

Children who have experienced sexual abuse or witnessed inappropriate behaviour by adults, including domestic violence, may act inappropriately and put themselves in situations that could make them vulnerable to harm. For older children this can result in different types of risk-taking behaviours, such as taking drugs, drinking alcohol or vulnerability to sexual exploitation as well as poor internet safety. Children may also self harm or suffer from eating disorders.

This challenging behaviour sometimes begins six months or a year into living with the carer. Each child is different and for some it will be a phase that they grow out of over time but for others professional help may be required.

Managing a child's behaviour

The strategies children have developed to stay safe can result in them resisting the special guardian taking control. It can feel natural to respond by becoming upset, authoritarian or aggressive. However this confirms to the child that they should not let down their defences and that they need to stay in control themselves.

Specialist parenting approaches such as therapeutic parenting help children move towards feeling more secure and resilient. It is vital for special guardians who need this support to get specialist training.

When children are upset or aggressive the key way to respond is to validate their emotions but not their behaviour. Special guardians can let them know it is okay to feel angry but it is not acceptable to punch or hurt someone because they feel angry. This is known as emotion coaching. This parenting technique helps children manage their feelings when they are upset and misbehaving, wind down the situation and build positive learning.

Carers may find this awkward when they start and children may pick up on this if it feels strange, forced or artificial. Special guardians may not be used to talking about their own feelings, which will naturally stop children from talking about theirs. So it's important for special guardians to ease in to the technique by talking about their own feelings.

Sitting down and talking through the situation once everyone has calmed down will help a child to recognise and be in touch with their emotions.

Some other ways professionals can support special guardians to deal with challenging behaviour are listed below:

- For bedwetting, special guardians should contact their GP to rule out the possibility of a physical infection. Otherwise they should treat it as a commonplace occurrence.
- If a child throws their toys and furniture around the special guardian should not simply remove these from their bedroom. Although this may seem like a reasonable response it can lead to feelings of neglect and may be seen as a punishment
- It is worth special guardians using caution with the use of 'time outs'. No matter how much they may intend this as a method of allowing calm and introducing space into the environment it deprives children of relationships and is often seen as a much greater punishment by children who have experienced neglect than is intended.
- To help children protect themselves from sexual exploitation and understand that it is always their right to say no, special guardians should have a look at the Let's Talk Pants website.
- Special guardians should never hit or shake a child. It teaches children that it is acceptable to hurt people and could trigger memories of past abuse.
- When a carer catches their child behaving appropriately, they should give them as much praise as they can. When they praise the child they should go into detail about why they have praised them. Don't say "good boy" as they may not realise what it is they have done to earn the praise.
- If challenging behaviour continues it is worth speaking to a GP about a referral to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) although there may be a long waiting list

Managing reactions to birth family contact

Seeing their birth parents can bring up very difficult feelings for children and a feeling of insecurity about their current situation. Their special guardian will become an expert in their feelings around this and can track and observe how their behaviour changes before, during and after contact to help manage their feelings.

Children need to know as much as possible about what is going to happen: who they are going to see, details of any activity, a reminder to be kind and if they are not happy about something to tell someone.

Others may be fine before contact but the impact hits them afterwards. Special guardians should give reassurance that they will be coming back to them as usual. Before they go carers could let them know they are going to do something together when they get back.

Special guardians may feel sorry for the child and be tempted to be more lenient with them if they are disruptive afterwards. However, it is better for them if they acknowledge how they feel and follow through with a consequence as they usually would.

Special guardians need to look after themselves

Special guardians often put pressure on themselves by feeling that they need to fix everything for the child. Professionals can help them to reduce their stress by supporting them to acknowledge:

- They do not need to – and cannot – do it all.
- Things do not have to go right the first time.
- It is okay to start small and that things take time to change.

A special guardian's own health and state of mind impacts their ability to parent so professionals should remind them that it is really important that they look after themselves. Picking up the phone to talk about how they feel if they are having a hard time or having a bath can sometimes be a necessity not a luxury for them and the child.

Practical ways special guardians can support their child

- Special guardians should always be consistent, predictable and available. If they say they will listen to a child or be there for them they need to follow through. This will help the child feel safe and learn that people can be trusted.
- Special guardians should remember that their child's past and present behaviour is linked; this may help a carer see frustrating behaviour as normal and accept it.
- Carers may find themselves treading very lightly or appeasing difficult or abusive behaviour to compensate for the lack of love a child has received. Children still need special guardians to help them manage their feelings by remaining consistent.
- Carers need to parent children based on their emotional age. If frustrated or tearful they may regress. A 10 year-old child who is acting emotionally like a 2 year-old can be rocked, sung to quietly and soothed without words or complex arguments
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- Special guardians should communicate with school teachers and other key people in the child's life to help them understand the extent of their behaviour and resolve it together.
- It is important to learn what triggers the child's reactions to previous traumatic memories and to catch them early on.
- Carers should expect to give instructions for tasks more than once, describing each stage the child needs to complete in detail. They should ask the child to repeat instructions back to them to make sure they have understood what they have asked them to do.

Key points

- Children living with special guardians have had difficult experiences during their early years and some might have feelings of loss and attachment issues. As a result they might behave and act in ways that are challenging and difficult for them and the special guardian to cope with.
- Children can show challenging behaviour in a number of ways from bedwetting, becoming withdrawn to becoming very aggressive.
- When children are upset or aggressive the key way for special guardians to respond is to validate their emotions but not their behaviour.
- Carer's should not put added pressure on themselves. Things will take time to change and settle down and they need to look after themselves too.

Useful links

Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Trained and Supported (KEEP)

www.keep.org.uk

Tel: 02078485891

Some children need more intensive help to recover from their early trauma. KEEP is a 16-20 week group training programme which promotes positive parenting skills designed for special guardians, foster and kinship carers to address children's difficulties reduce disruption and enable them to be successful in childhood and adulthood. Programmes run for children aged 3 to 6 years, 5 to 12 years and 12 to 17 years. It is funded by local authorities and the Department for Education.

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