

Seeking a family

If you're caring for an asylum-seeking child, follow Dr Matthew Hodes' advice on how to make them feel safe and cared for

You may already care for an asylum seeking child, or you may do so sometime in the future. You might be passionately involved in bettering their lives, or you may have very limited knowledge on the plight of children seeking sanctuary.

Either way, as a foster carer it's your job to look after the children

who are brought to you. And having an understanding of their situation can help.

These children are particularly vulnerable.

When caring for them, keep in mind that they are seeking asylum for a reason.

An **asylum seeker** is someone who is in the process of having their asylum claim examined by the Home Office. Until all appeals have been filed they have a legal status in Britain and should not be returned*.

make the child feel welcome in your home and a valued member of the family. Doing so may have more of an impact than you think.

A report by Dr Matthew Hodes of the Division of Neuroscience and Mental Health at Imperial College London shows that where these children live now has a huge impact on their psychological state.

Those living with foster carers generally lower their levels of distress. Not only are they cared for, but living with a foster family can also help these children feel less isolated.

Dr Hodes says: "The paper shows that foster families are probably very important in helping the unaccompanied asylum seeking children with regard to their mental health. Another study I have carried out [not yet published] also suggests foster families help the young

"You should listen, but not ask questions"

people's social adjustment. "For example, the support that a foster carer gives helps the children to remain in education, and have more happy and stable friendships."

What to look out for

If the child has been exposed to traumatic events look out for signs of distress, such as crying, withdrawal, irritability, nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and fearfulness. Dr Hodes says: "If this doesn't settle in a short time, the concerns should be discussed with the social worker and consideration given to

"Foster carers help with social adjustment"

refer the young person to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services."

Be sensitive to traumatic experiences

Be careful of asking questions that may distress the child or young person. Dr Hodes says: "If the child

talks spontaneously about their past it is good if the foster carer listens sympathetically.

"You could ask questions about events and experiences that are not traumatic, such as their experience of school, or religious participation."



If the child has a particularly traumatic memory, Dr Hodes advises that you do not question them about it. He says:

"If there have been traumatic experiences, or things that might be disturbing for the child, then as a foster carer you should listen but not ask questions.

"Asking questions could disturb the child even more and make them distressed."

A **refugee** is someone who has been granted protection by the state under the Geneva Convention 1951. They have the right to work, access benefits and pay taxes*.

*Taken from The Anchor Project www.anchorproject.org/

Meal times

You can help asylum seeking children feel comfortable in your home by cooking food that they are familiar with. Rather than cooking something separate for them, let the whole family have a taste.

Look out for Dr Andrea Warman's advice on page 34.

Nightmares

If the asylum seeking child in your care has trouble sleeping at night, it could be linked to a traumatic experience in their past.

A **failed asylum seeker** is someone whose claim has been unsuccessful and is awaiting to return to their country of origin. However, if it isn't safe for them to return they may have to stay for the time being*.

on page 31 for dealing with sleeping problems.

Points to consider

The child may have a limited English vocabulary. Think about how you can make it easy for them to communicate in your home. Could you learn some of their native tongue as you help them learn yours?

It is important for the child to be aware of their cultural background. You may enjoy learning about it too - why not have a go at learning about their country of origin together? Dr Andrea Warman, BAAF's Foster Care Development Consultant, says: "Valuing something about them can help an asylum

seeking child to feel at home."

Tell us your story: email haveyoursay@fosterfamilies.co.uk or write to 'Foster Families, Flat 2, 2a Brook Street, Worcester, WR1 1JB'.

More on this next issue.



*Taken from The Anchor Project www.anchorproject.org/

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