




# Disability and Mental Health

A Foster Parent's Guide to Complex Needs

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Outstanding  
since 2013





**Fostering a child with physical or learning disabilities, a medical condition or a mental health disorder may sound daunting, but with the right knowledge and support, you can help children with complex needs thrive.**

# Fostering a child with complex needs

It's not a walk in the park to foster a child that has mobility issues, health problems, mental health disorders or learning disabilities, but the most rewarding things in life are never easy. There is a growing need for foster parents to look after disabled children and young people, so we've extended our disability services to help find appropriate, safe foster homes for children with complex needs.

If you have patience, understanding, a good sense of humour, can be extra vigilant with safety, be open-minded, good at communicating, be an advocate and are committed to meeting children's needs, then you have all the makings of a foster parent that can care for a child with complex needs.



# Understanding complex needs

When a child or young person has a disability, illness, sensory impairment and/or a serious mental health condition that requires a lot of additional support on a day-to-day basis, we class this as having 'complex needs'. A child might have complex needs from birth, after an illness or injury or after experiencing trauma early on in life. Many of the children that come into care will have complex needs for a variety of reasons, so we always need foster families who can roll their sleeves up and give these kids the love and support they deserve.

## Types of complex needs

Here are some examples of complex needs that affect a child's daily life.

### Physical disabilities

This could be hearing or visual impairments, acquired brain injury, epilepsy or a disability that requires the use of a wheelchair.

### Learning or developmental disabilities

This could be autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Down's Syndrome.

### Health conditions

This could be diabetes, a heart defect, Chron's disease or even cancer.

### Mental health disorders

This could be chronic depression, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

**Under the Equality Act 2010, a mental illness is considered a disability when it has long-term effects on your daily activities.**

It's important to note that it's common to have multiple conditions that overlap, creating a complex and unique range of needs and issues. For instance, a child with Down's Syndrome may also have autism as well as mobility issues. Having multiple conditions of a complex nature can affect a child's:

- Behaviour
- Communication
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Cognitive ability
- Physical appearance



**“Don't underestimate yourself. Be willing to give disabled children a chance – you will learn a lot from it and will reap the rewards!”**

- Joanne, foster parent

# Disability

## myths debunked

### **Myth 1: I need to be a qualified nurse to care for a child with complex health needs**

You don't need to be medically qualified, or have previous medical experience to look after a child with complex health needs. All training will be provided. For us, it's about learning and development. If you are willing to learn, you can foster a child that has more complex health needs.

### **Myth 2: Children with disabilities have physical needs and use a wheelchair**

Not all children with disabilities will have physical needs or require home adaptations and not all disabilities are visible. Disabilities vary and can include; autism, learning disabilities, visual impairments, deaf or hard of hearing and acquired brain injury.

### **Myth 3: I can't become a foster parent if my child has a disability**

You can still foster even if your own child has a disability. It's about careful consideration of the impact of fostering on your child. As a parent of a disabled child, you would have invaluable skills and experience to bring to the role.

### **Myth 4: I can't foster as I have a disability**

You can absolutely foster if you have a disability. There are expectations within fostering regarding your health to ensure that fostering wouldn't have a negative impact on you or your health, but this is the same for everyone applying to foster, no matter your ability.



### **Myth 5: Autism is caused by bad parenting**

Autism is not caused by bad parenting. There are still ongoing studies and research being carried out as to the cause of autism, however the hypothesis of 'bad' or 'poor' parenting has been disproved.

### **Myth 6: Children with autism can't communicate**

Children with autism can communicate and this will be in their own way. Some children with autism have good verbal communication and can communicate their wishes and feelings well. Others will have limited vocabulary but use non-verbal cues such as signs, gestures, pictures and body language to aid their communication. This can seem a lot less daunting when you consider that over 70% of all human communication is non-verbal.

### **Myth 7: Children with autism do not show affection or eye contact**

While these are recognised as autism traits, it's not necessarily true of all children with autism. Some do give eye contact, although this may differ to other children. Children with autism may be oversensitive to touch and hugs, however may show affection in other ways that are individual to them.

### **Myth 8: ADHD is an excuse for challenging behaviour**


ADHD is a real medical condition and is not used as a label for 'challenging behaviour'.

# Benefits of fostering a child with complex needs

There is so much joy to be had in transforming a child's life who has had to deal with not only turbulence within the family home, but also their own set of medical challenges. For them, you're providing the loving, caring home they need to thrive and learn new skills, but it's also an opportunity for yourself to grow. There's a lot to be learnt when it comes to fostering disabled children or those with additional needs, and you may discover sides of yourself you didn't know existed.

**As a foster parent to a young person with complex needs, you get to:**

- Help them become more independent
- Teach them important life skills
- Help them forge meaningful relationships
- Give them the chance to make happy memories
- Show them what a loving family is
- Watch them grow, learn and develop
- Help them reach their full potential



**“Despite the difficulties, fostering a disabled child is the most rewarding thing we’ve ever done.”**

- Joanne and Stephen

# How to support children with physical disabilities



As well as providing your foster child with a safe and secure home, we thought it would be helpful to give you a list of easy-to-implement ideas to support a child with physical disabilities.

## For children with mobility issues

- Make sure rugs are secured to the floor to avoid tripping over and remove furniture that can be knocked over or bumped into.
- Make rooms as spacious as possible to accommodate any mobility equipment a child may have.
- Work with the child and your dedicated therapist to discover the best types of cups and other handheld items to use that make it easy to grasp. For instance, some may need a handle on their cup while others may prefer cups without a handle.
- Ensure their bed is easy to get in and out of.
- Although many parents and foster parents alike prefer to keep screen time to a minimum, tablets can be an easier way for disabled children to play educational games and learn.
- Make sure to learn about any equipment they use, such as a wheelchair, so you know what to do if something goes wrong and can help them as quickly as possible.

## For children with hearing or visual impairments

- Try to find other ways of communicating through signing, symbols, word boards, music or braille. As a disability foster parent, you'll receive specific training to help you and your foster child communicate.
- For a child with visual impairments, establish how best to greet them, as an unexpected hug from behind or pat on the shoulder could be quite startling for someone with hearing or visual impairments.

- For a child with hearing impairments, they may practice lip reading, so try to be as clear as possible without talking too slowly and always face them when speaking.
- Make sure to learn about the technology they use, such as hearing aids, so you know what to do if they break.
- Show them where noisy appliances are in the house and try to turn off TVs and radios when not in use as background noise can have a big effect on their ability to hear.
- Encourage wider family members to not leave them out of conversations when visiting. It can be hard to follow along in big groups, but like any other child, they still want to feel included.





# How to support children with learning or developmental disabilities



**When it comes to caring for a child with learning and developmental disabilities, it's all about patience and understanding. Here are some easy-to-implement tips if you're fostering a child with learning disabilities.**

- Some children with learning disabilities take longer to process verbal information, so make sure to give them the time they need to respond and don't fill in the gaps for them. This will help build up their confidence.
- Many often present with challenging behaviour, including hitting and biting. Make sure you find out what triggers their emotional responses so you can look to mitigate exposure.
- Use concrete, clear language and try to stay away from irony and sarcasm. For example, a lot of autistic people struggle to identify nuances in language and tend to take things very literally, leading to misunderstandings and frustration.
- Provide structure – many children with learning disabilities thrive on routine and can break down if the routine is broken. You could create a fun wall chart with a list of hobbies, chores and weekly menus to follow.
- Children with learning disabilities may also have sensory issues, so make sure to set up a sensory space in the home with calming décor, mood lighting and other sensory items to help them feel at ease.

# How to support children with a serious medical illness

**It's not easy to watch a child suffer with a medical complication, as they may be in pain and it's not always possible to take the pain away. However, there are things you can do as a foster parent to make their experience in your home a positive one.**

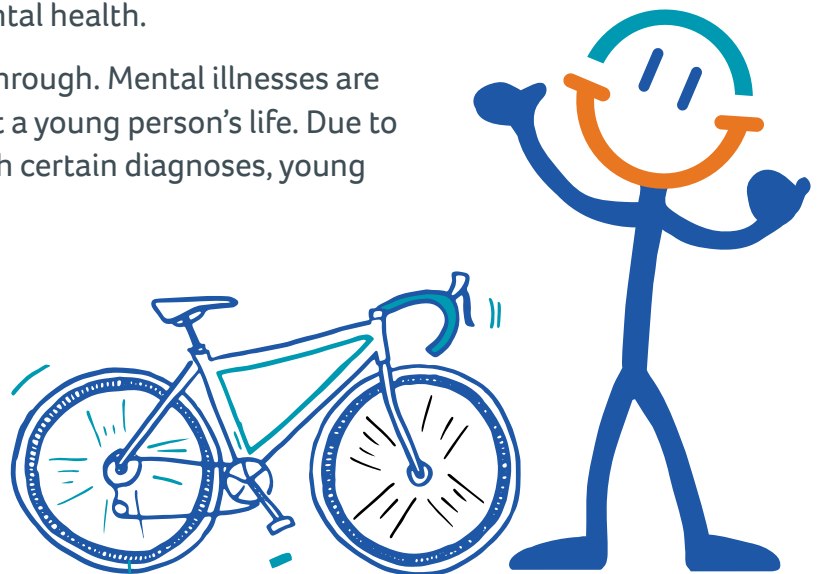
- Learn as much about their illness as possible. This will put you in the best stead to spot any health issues, talk to them about it and just generally support them.
- Lean on support groups and local networks. At Fostering People, we have built up amazing local networks where everybody supports each other. Don't be afraid to ask for help or information.
- Your foster child may be confused about changes to their body or sensations they're feeling caused by the illness, so make sure you're there to talk when they need to.
- Engage in fun activities as a way to help them escape their illness. Music, painting, writing, singing – these are all ways they can express themselves and let off some emotional steam.
- Kids will be kids at the end of the day, so tackle any behavioural issues as you would any other child. Spoiling or molly-coddling them won't do them any good, and chances are, they want to be treated the same as their friends or siblings.



# How to support children with mental health disorders

**Mental health is something that affects all of us, however children in care may be more prone to develop serious mental health conditions that impact their day-to-day lives. Here are some ways to support a child in your care who is seriously struggling with their mental health.**

- It sounds simple, but ensuring they eat healthy foods and get a decent amount of exercise can all go towards improving mental health. It won't be the cure, but it's a good starting point.
- Listen to them and be there for them at all times. It's not guaranteed they'll open up, especially not right away, but when they do, listen without any judgement.
- Learn about their diagnosis so you're in a better position to understand the root cause and help.
- Focus on their achievements or talents. Children with mental health disorders may lose interest in previous passions or hobbies, so try to bring their spark back with fun activities that engage all the family. Knowing you're invested in their happiness will also help them feel valued as a person.
- Give them space and don't expect things to change overnight.
- As communicating their emotions isn't always easy, you may need to pick up on body language, a change in behaviour or spot anything out of the ordinary which may be causing a decline in their mental health.
- Remember what the child has been through. Mental illnesses are real illnesses that can seriously affect a young person's life. Due to the behavioural issues that come with certain diagnoses, young people can be misjudged as just being moody, difficult or angry when this isn't the case.
- Look after your own mental health! It can be tough to deal with a mentally-ill young person, so you need to ensure you're strong enough for when things don't go smoothly.



# Disability training for foster parents

As an Ofsted outstanding and Care Inspectorate excellent fostering agency, we provide bespoke and specific training for all of our families working with our disabled children. We will ensure that our foster families are fully trained and supported to care for an individual child's needs.

## Pay for disability foster parents

We appreciate fostering a child with additional needs is a challenging role, but we make sure to reward our foster parents accordingly. The pay will vary, but you'll receive a bigger allowance when taking on a child with complex needs. You'll also get 14 days respite a year to take a well-deserved break from your demanding job.

## Read Josh's story [here!](#)

Josh was a 2-year-old boy who had never left the hospital. Thanks to Fostering People, he now has a family home to call his own.





# It's not just for children in care

**Fostering People currently work with Birmingham City Council to provide short break foster placements for disabled children.**

These children are not in foster care and live at home with their families, however, specialist Fostering People foster parents provide the families with much-needed support by looking after these children and young people for short periods of time.

The children often have complex medical needs or have more profound physical disabilities. Therefore, the breaks we provide enable parents to spend one-on-one time with any birth children or simply take a well-earned rest.

# Why foster with Fostering People

Fostering agencies offer many similar things, but they're also a little different in the way they work. What sets us apart is our commitment to building strong local networks of support that you can tap into. We're based around you, in your community. We share your experiences and work alongside you to achieve the very best for children. Combined with a very powerful fostering model and excellent training and benefits, you'll soon realise that quality is at the heart of everything we do.



- **Excellent fostering allowances**  
As an IFA, we're able to offer excellent financial allowances to reward our foster parents for their hard work and dedication. The amount you receive varies, but our foster parents currently receive a weekly foster care allowance of between £385 and £700 depending on the child's age, needs and where you're based in the UK.
- **Dedicated professional teams**  
You'll have access to social workers and other professionals so that whenever you need it, expert help is always at hand.
- **Regular supervision**  
You'll have your own dedicated social worker who'll meet up with you regularly to discuss progress, answer any queries and offer guidance when you need it. They're there for anything you may need.
- **Training**  
We provide you with excellent training both to help you prepare to foster as well as ongoing training to support your professional development.
- **24/7 help**  
If you need us out of hours, including bank holidays, weekends and nights, we're just a phone call away.
- **Respite care**  
When you need a break from the challenges of fostering, we'll arrange for the child or children in your care to be looked after by another trusted family. We allow up to 14 days respite care a year.
- **Fun events for families and children**  
There's always something going on locally, including day trips, picnics and other activities, where you can catch up with other families and share good times together.

## Take your first step to becoming a foster parent today

If you're interested in becoming a foster parent and would like to learn more, then we'd love to hear from you.

[Get in touch](#)

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0800 077 8159  
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