Communications Guidance

Description

Communication and Code of Conduct

https://sparksfostering.org/wp-content/uploads/speaker/post-12818.mp3?cb=1709401352.mp3

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Good communication is the foundation of good relationships and good partnership working. The Sparks Fostering Communications Guidance provides the blueprint for communication for all members of Sparks Fostering

All members of Sparks Fostering (staff, foster carers, panel members and affiliates) are expected to conduct themselves with professionalism, respect and in a manner which reflects positively on Sparks Fostering.

All interactions with others should have an initial shared understanding of the following: how often contact is expected; what types and quality/amount of information is to be shared; how long the communication should take; and expectation regarding timescales for responses.

General meeting etiquette requires that all members of the interaction are given space and time to contribute. Also, we must be mindful that some people talk while they think, while others need silence to think through their thoughts; so we must do our utmost to give time and considerations to both types of need.

Any breach of the Communication and Code of Conduct is likely to fall under the ‘Whistleblowing Policy’ and will be managed accordingly.

Recording communication

All communication should be recorded, either in detail or in brief (depending on the importance of the information).

Staff who touch type are encouraged to type notes during meetings and discussions whenever this is possible – this ensures that no relevant information is forgotten, the records are likely to be more accurate and the records can be shared with the other meeting members immediately; it also saves time in not having to write up or share the recordings later.



If it’s not possible to write up the interactions immediately (for example if the situation is highly emotional or the worker is not near their laptop), the incidents must be written up as soon as possible (ideally within 24 hours).

Records should be stored in the appropriate location. Journal and diary entries are written to record day to day actions. The records are ‘working documents’, which means that they should always contain up to date information about the subject of the records and must be reviewed regularly. Tasks should be recorded and monitored in a timely manner to ensure that work is being completed in a timely manner.

Face to face meetings

The foster carer and staff supervision records will state the frequency of supervision – the default is monthly supervision. Newer foster carers and foster carers with residents who are struggling should expect regular contact, and frequency may be reduced for experienced foster carers with settled children. The purpose of the meetings is for the social worker to review the home conditions, speak with children being looked after, and to review the foster carer’s supervisions and the child’s records and care plan. Unannounced visits to fostering homes include a full review of foster carer and residents records, which requires sight of all areas of the home and discussions with household members (if they are available). Where possible, children will also be spoken with at unannounced visits.

Staff and foster carers (including the secondary carer) should aim to meet face to face with other members of Sparks Fostering regularly so that they may build relationships with other members of Sparks Fostering and provide emotional (and sometimes practical) support to each other when it is required. These meetings may be with one or two people, or it could be with a larger group; however, the aim should be to get to know the whole team (not only a few members).

When external meetings are held face to face, staff and foster carers should try to attend. When this is not possible, they should request to attend via video call.

All meetings (including relatively casual meetings) should be recorded as ‘Actions’ and saved to the appropriate records. Agreed tasks/actions should be recorded and monitored as appropriate.

Dress code and code of conduct: Staff and foster carers are expected to present as professionals in professional meetings – this includes wearing smart-casual clothing and using appropriate language. Social workers should also be respectful of the social norms of the fostering homes we visit – so if the family members cover more of their bodies, staff should aim to wear more covered clothing for visits (and online calls).

Maintaining records and messaging

Staff, foster carers and children all have ‘records’. The records outline the checks and pertinent information about the subject of the records and the records also list the upcoming tasks (‘actions’). So, for example, staff or foster carer records may identify training needs or dates for checks; and children’s records include actions agreed in care plans.

Code of conduct: Professional and respectful language should be used in written communication. Messages should be written in the most simple way that is necessary to convey the message accurately. Staff and foster carers must use language that would be considered to be respectful if the resident was to read it.

Emails

Staff and foster carers are expected to reply to emails within 3 working days (even if it's only to acknowledge the email and/or give a later date for agreed actions).

Staff who are given Sparks Fostering email addresses are expected to file all outgoing and incoming emails in an orderly filing system within their email account. Staff should be mindful that personal emails cannot be sent from the Sparks account and that line managers can access the email accounts when required; indeed, a review of email organisation may be a part of supervision.

Delays and disorganisation in emails is as problematic as poorly managed case records – both have to be rectified urgently.

Code of conduct: Line managers should be copied into any communication which is fraught or tense. This ensures that the appropriate support and oversight is available.

Phone calls

Unplanned phone calls should only be made when the information to be shared cannot wait for a reply to an email or for a booked meeting. The reason for this is that unplanned calls can be very difficult to record and also, unplanned calls can make it difficult for staff (and foster carers) to focus on and time manage their other tasks and commitments.

If a foster carer is struggling with the behaviour (or other care) for a child, immediate support can be provided via a phone call at any time (24 hours, 7 days a week). Where a support worker is allocated, they should be the first option for unplanned calls. If the support worker isn't available, or if the situation requires qualified social work support, the social worker or registered manager may be contacted.



Unplanned phone calls and phone messages should only be used to relay the information that is needed to address the current urgent situation. When staff or foster carers require emotional support, time to talk through (or vent) about a live situation, or anything else that requires greater time, this should be made clear at the start of the conversation so that sufficient time can be put aside for the call (if possible).

Planned calls should be carried out via video calls whenever possible. If there are technical issues preventing video calls, the issues should be resolved as soon as possible (within 1 week).

Code of conduct: Professional and respectful language should be used on phone calls. If a situation becomes tense and it becomes difficult to maintain professional decorum, the call should be ended and rescheduled after securing line management support. Staff and foster carers must not respond with raised voices or hostility even if this is presented to them – this also applies to face to face and video communication.

Video calls

The default for the majority of recruitment, assessment and supervision meetings is video calls. It's the Sparks Fostering approach that most training, staff supervisions and reflective workshops are held remotely and that face to face meetings are reserved for foster carer supervisions, safeguarding purposes, specialist training and/or for more casual meet ups (to encourage relationship building). Face to face meetings and supervisions can be arranged when requested.

The foster carer and staff supervision records should clarify how many supervisions can be carried out remotely (via video calls) and how many should be face to face. The agreement should consider the preferences of the foster carer and staff members, the sensitivity of the information to be discussed and the safeguarding or support needs of children being looked after.

Video calls are very time efficient (in that several can be booked within a day), so it is expected that when video calls need to be booked in, there should be availability within 5 working days.

In general, video calls should not be booked for more than one or two hours because any meetings longer than this are likely to be less productive and more draining for attendees. Strong agendas, good planning, and focused discussions should result in good outcomes. A short (5min+) break should be included every hour of a meeting. This also applies with face to face meetings.

All video calls should be booked with a calendar invitation which has the link to the call, and details about the session (an agenda if necessary, with details of any pre-reading). The title of the calendar invite should make sense to both parties – so for example, I would save and invite to Sehar as 'Tay and Sehar meeting', and not 'Sehar meeting' – because when Sehar looks at her calendar 'Sehar meeting' is not a useful reminder or prompt for her.

Due to the amount of work that is carried out online and via video calls, all staff and foster carers are expected to have suitable arrangements, including good internet connection, a laptop and device witha camera, good microphone and good lighting (or a ring light if necessary). Foster carers and/or staff should be making notes directly onto records during meetings, so meetings should be held on laptops whenever possible.

If it's necessary to use a phone for video calls from time to time, the phone should be secured at around eye level and fixed on a stand (i.e. not moving around). The other conditions of presentation apply.

Staff and foster carers must be mindful of how they present on video calls. Unlike face to face group meetings, all members can see the facial expressions of all attendees at the same time. Therefore, staff and foster carers must be mindful of how they are presenting to others – for example, if a staff member is distracted by phone messages or calls, it may look like they are finding the meeting boring or they're not paying attention. It may be beneficial to turn off notifications from other devices during any meetings (face to face or virtual). Full faces should be visible on video calls and the camera should be placed at an appropriate distance (your face should be approximately one third of the screen with a space between the top of your head and the frame and gaps on either side of you). Cameras should be placed at eye level or slightly higher so that direct eye-to-eye contact is made. If the lighting is poor, lamps should be placed on both sides behind the camera (or a ring light can be used). The name presented at the meetings should be amended so that it shows as your full name with 'Sparks Fostering' written in brackets after your name.

When attending group meetings, use the 'hand up' feature so that the facilitator knows that you wish to contribute (don't forget to unmute yourself and put the 'hand' back down when talking). As with face to face meetings, do not talk over each other or cut in when others are talking.

The background of all calls should be neat and clean. Calls should be taken from tables (not sofas) and the background should look as close to an office as possible. Professionals are encouraged to use one of the template 'office' backgrounds if their background doesn't look like a home office.

As with face to face meetings, attendees are expected to arrive a few minutes before the meeting starts. If it's known that there may be issues with technology, connection, log ins or other potential issues, these should be resolved well in advance of the meeting.

It is expected that cameras are kept on for video calls, unless they need to turn their cameras off for a short time to take calls or deal with personal issues. When cameras are off during video interactions, it is assumed that the person isn't available at that time.

If you've never used the chosen platform (e.g. Zoom, Teams) before, you may wish to look at a YouTube tutorial before joining the meeting.

Any camera, sound and microphone issues must be resolved as soon as possible (at the latest within a week) and can't be an excuse for regularly attending video calls with the camera off or with poorsound. Cameras may be turned off for a period of time in large training sessions when directcommunication with attendees or full engagement isn't expected – attendees should avoid being theonly person with the camera off.

Code of conduct: Presentation during video calls should mirror expected presentation during face to face meetings: Clothing is to be appropriate for the equivalent type of face to face meetings; posture is to be appropriate (no slumping in chairs or excessive fidgeting); meals shouldn't be eaten (unless there is prior agreement); and appropriate non-verbal active listening is to demonstrated (head nods, eye contact, attentive facial expression). Meetings are to be taken in quiet environments (and certainly not while driving). Microphones should be muted in group calls when you're not speaking and care should be taken to ensure that non-attendees aren't included in the calls (i.e. no pets, children or other people to be present during calls unless there is prior agreement). As with all fostering related work, calls and information is considered confidential, so if other people (who shouldn't have access to the information) can see or here the work, microphones and videos should be turned off and the call may need to be rescheduled.

Text messages and WhatsApp messages

This form of messaging should only be used for relatively casual interactions that aren't urgent and don't require follow up work. It should be noted that text messages and WhatsApp messages are easily missed or forgotten, and there may be a delay in seeing the message. Furthermore, as with phone calls, text messages (including WhatsApp messages) can distract attention from other work (or commitments) and do not have the same level of oversight and tracking as emails.

Out of hours support

The standard working hours of Sparks Fostering staff are between 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday. Telephone contact outside those times (including text messages) should only happen if there is a situation which requires urgent attention. Communication via emails can happen at any time and it is understood that those messages may not be checked outside of standard working hours and may take some time for a reply.

Staff and foster carers should feel able to call an appropriate person from Sparks Fostering at any time that immediate and urgent support is needed, for example, if the foster carer needs immediate advice or practical help with a live incident regarding a resident.

If calls are made out of office/working hours, the calls (or other support) should be focused on immediate needs only and kept as short as possible. Any information or support that can wait until working hours should be booked in for a planned meeting within an agreed timescale.

Presentation, dress code and Etiquette

All staff and foster carers are expected to be mindful and respectful of cultural, religious and personal sensitivities with regards to presentation, interactions and etiquette.

This means that smart clothing (shirts (not low cut) and knee-length (or longer) skirts/trousers) must be worn to all multi-agency meetings and in first-time interactions with others. When a relationship is established, there may be some relaxing of expectations around clothing; however, cultural, religious and personal sensitivities must always be respected. For example, when visiting a home where females cover their bodies fully, staff are also expected to wear reasonably high neck clothing, cover their legs to at least mid-calf, and also cover their arms at least to their elbows.

The same respect must be shown regarding etiquette in people's homes – for example, staff must remove their shoes at the entrance of the home if that is the norm for the household. Rather than asking 'do you want me to take my shoes off?', staff should ask 'Do you take your shoes off at the door?', which makes it less awkward for the residents to ask staff to remove their shoes. Staff members may wish to always have socks with them for this situation (or they can choose to be barefoot in the home).

Guests to fostering homes (and meetings with staff in other settings) should be offered tea, coffee or water and biscuits (or similar snack) as a courtesy and warm welcome to all visitors. Foster carers should be mindful that the way that they welcome guests can be considered to be a reflection of how welcoming they may be to the children/residents they care for. When foster carers (and/or their household) meet with each other and/or staff for learning experiences, they may use their learning allowances to purchase snacks or cover other expenses in relation to the activity they're doing together.

Meetings with others shouldn't be carried out in places that sell alcohol, unless it's established that all parties attend such places normally. This avoids offence or insensitivity towards those who may be recovering from alcohol addiction, or whose religious beliefs require them to remain distanced from alcohol. Drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes or vaping aren't permitted during work interactions and being intoxicated (or under the influence of any substances) may lead to dismissal or termination of approval. If meeting for a meal, the venue should accommodate the needs of all attendees.

Shouting, making unfounded accusations, gossiping, discriminatory behaviour and other such hostile, toxic and/or anti-social behaviour is not acceptable: All interactions must be carried out from a place of mutual respect, compassion and patience.

gift giving and professional boundaries

Sparks Fostering encourages relationship building between all members; however, certain boundaries have to be maintained in the best interests of the children we care for.

All personal relationships between line managers and their supervisees must be declared. If a foster carer has a previous relationship with their supervising social worker or if they start to socialise, it's likely to be in the best interest of the residents that the foster carers are allocated to another social worker.

Likewise, gift giving between supervising social worker and foster carers or residents must be declared and must not be of high value. It must be clear in the value of the gift given that it cannot be perceived as an inducement or bribe to persuade a change in behaviour.

Commercially sensitive information

The Sparks Fostering Policies are available to read publicly; however, they are subject to Copyright. This means that permission must be sought (by email to the registered manager) before duplicating the information on the Sparks Fostering website.

All templates used by Sparks Fostering are also subject to Copyright and are commercially sensitive. This means that information can only be shared in line with the policies and when it's of benefit to Sparks Fostering.

Sparks Fostering staff and foster carers must not retain documents (including templates or other information) after they leave Sparks Fostering, other than 'personal' information which is about themselves.

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user