

# Could you foster a disabled child?

This is a difficult question for many people when they first come into fostering, and even experienced foster carers do not always have the knowledge to answer it. We hope that if you read this, you will be able to make an informed decision and that we will at least have provoked some thoughts!

Of course, you may be knowledgeable about disabilities already, or you may be disabled yourself. If so, if you think we have left out anything important, or if you disagree with anything, please let us know. There is a shortage of carers for disabled children, and this can result in them being placed in residential homes, or with families outside the Borough of Hackney, sometimes a long way from friends, birth parents or schools.

## What do we mean by disability?

It has been said that, in a lot of peoples minds, “disability”= “wheelchair”. After all, what is the symbol on those tempting but (to most of us) forbidden parking spaces close to the entrance to the supermarket? Or on the door of the big toilet with the light switch that turns out to be an alarm?

Of course, it is perfectly true that some disabled children use wheelchairs, some or all of the time. If you asked yourself some questions about your home and its accessibility when you read the title of this piece, then that makes perfect sense. However, the word “disability” includes a very wide range of conditions. Disabled children may well not require any special equipment, space or accessibility at home. For example, some children have learning difficulties. These can be severe, including children who may not learn to talk, while other children attend mainstream school, with perhaps some classroom support. Other children may be visually or hearing impaired, obviously to different degrees.

## Why ‘disabled children’, not ‘children with disabilities’?

Over the years, the terms we use to describe various groups of children have changed.

Terms like “handicapped” and “mongoloid” have fallen or been pushed out of use. But, to many people, “children with disabilities” sounds somehow better than “disabled children”. After all, it emphasises that these are children first and disabled second. But, many disabled people have told me, disability is due to society’s response as well as to their physical condition- they are disabled as well as having a disability.

This makes sense to me. So, I take my cue from them and talk about “disabled people” and “disabled children”.

For reasons which are not clear to scientists, more and more children are being diagnosed with disorders on the autistic spectrum. These children can be very different from one another, functioning at all levels of intelligence. Some autistic people have severe learning

### **The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time**

This novel by Mark Haddon is written from the point of view of a boy with Asperger's syndrome (a form of autism) who is a genius at mathematics. It has won much praise and is a fascinating book – but if you are planning to care for an autistic child, you should not expect them to have the same characteristics as Christopher, the boy in the book.

difficulties and have difficulty with spoken language. On the other hand, there is at least one very eminent autistic university professor, in the USA. All of them have in common a different way of seeing the world that demands a special kind of understanding. Their parents and carers find that they learn this from them. It can be an intriguing experience.

Some children have more than one disability, and there is a vast number of causes, including illness, accidents, problems before and during birth, hereditary conditions, and, tragically, violence, especially towards babies. Disability may be permanent or may come and go during all of our lives. Whether or not we see ourselves as disabled, most of us will experience some level of disability due to accident, illness or old age. In fact, some disabled people have been known to refer to non-disabled people as TABs –short for “Temporarily Able Bodied”.

### **What do disabled children need from foster carers?**

The most important things are the same as for any other child –

- Valuing them for who they are.
- Understanding in terms of their culture and identity
- Love, encouragement, care.
- Patience
- Sometimes firmness.

### **Irrelevant but interesting fact:**

The UK's leading expert on autism is Simon Baron-Cohen, brother of actor Sacha Baron-Cohen, better known as Ali G.

If you are approved to foster, then the likelihood is that you can give these things in good measure!

### **What else do disabled children need from you?**

This question has as many answers as there are disabled children, as you can probably guess from the previous section. One thing that they will have in common is that there will probably be more professionals involved with the child - take your pick from doctors, nurses, occupational, speech and physio- therapists, classroom assistants, SENCOs to name but a few. Together with you and the social worker, they function as a “team around the child”, communicating with one another and with you. The result of this will be that you

are not alone in caring for the child. There will always be a relevant specialist to consult, both before and during the placement of the child. Even carers who are familiar with some types of disability may need to learn about others. Of course, another result of this may be that you need to attend more appointments than with a non-disabled child.

In most cases, there will be a support group, national or local, offering advice for your child's particular condition. You will adapt your expectations to the child's abilities. Parents and carers are proud when a child achieves well, say at school or at sports. In the case of a very severely physically disabled child, that pride might come from helping them to achieve something that might seem almost negligible in another child, perhaps a limited leg or arm movement.

You must be prepared to learn about your child's needs – for example, some children with learning difficulties find it easier to use methods of communication other than speech. There is a simplified sign language known as 'Maketon', and a picture system, used in many schools, called PECS. The basics are not too difficult, and using them at home will help the child. Other children with severe learning or physical disabilities may need a great deal of physical care – dressing, washing etc. There may be urine and faeces to clear up – most people seem to feel that this is surprisingly easy to get used to. After all, anyone who has brought up a baby has done a certain amount of this sort of thing!

Some children may have none of these needs, but may behave oddly or conspicuously. While you may quickly get used to their behaviours at home, not being too 'embarrassment-prone' in public is an advantage, for example the child may walk up to complete strangers and shake their hands, or sit down on the pavement, cross their legs and refuse to walk. (Other people may react just as strangely to disabled children, especially if for some reason it is obvious that you are not their birth parents. They may express their admiration for you, say, "I could never do that", buy the child an ice cream or even try to press a fiver into your embarrassed hand).

As in most walks of life, a **sense of humour** comes in handy! Behaviour management or modification programmes are sometimes devised to extinguish undesirable behaviours, so you may consult with a psychologist about this. Mostly, they are about rewarding the child for good behaviour. The programmes are usually reasonably simple, but must be carried out consistently.

Some children have very challenging behaviour, for example running off, constant noise, inability to sit still, and even assaults. Whether you can cope with a child like this, and if so how you can be supported, will be the subject of discussion before any decision about a placement.

Having emphasised that not all disabled children have wheelchairs and need any special housing, some of them do. They may also need various other types of bulky equipment. If you have a ground floor house or flat, or generally good access, we would love to hear from you.

One thing that anyone caring for a disabled child needs to be aware of is that disabled children have a right to the absolute maximum level of choice and experience in their lives that is possible. This is true of all children, but it is doubly important to bear it in mind with disabled children, because of the way that they can be sidelined or disadvantaged otherwise.

## **Equalities**

As you probably know, it is very important that children's race and culture are considered when they are fostered. Placing a black child with white carers or vice versa almost never happens, for very good reasons concerning the child's sense of identity. The same principal applies just as much if the child is disabled. This makes it doubly important that carers come from every ethnic background

## **What about school?**

Wherever possible, children with special needs are now educated in main stream school, sometimes with a Statement of Special Educational Needs that specifies extra support if they need it. Some children still benefit from attending special schools of one sort or another. For about thirty years now, all children of school age have been entitled to education in school. Prior to this, some children with learning difficulties were classed as "uneducable" and sent to day centres during the day, and people still sometimes confuse special schools for these. Nothing could be further from the truth. Special schools are staffed by properly qualified specialist teachers and Local Authority special schools will teach to the National Curriculum (modified as necessary). They are subject to inspection by Ofsted. Because these schools tend to involve longer journeys by children who may be less independent, school transport is often available.

## **What's in it for you?**

As with all fostering there is stress, frustration, hard work and sometimes disappointment. But at the same time, as with all fostering, there is the satisfaction that comes from giving a home to a needy person and the rewards of seeing them grow in your care. Also, a good measure of fun and joy. Perhaps more so than with other foster children, there is the feeling that you are meeting a special challenge, and probably learning a lot in the process.

Financially, most disabled children are harder work, or at least more time-consuming, to look after than non-disabled children, so you will be paid a higher fee, as well as receive allowances for the child. How much will depend on the child.

## **So... could you foster a disabled child?**

After reading this, you may feel that there could be a disabled child to whom you could offer a home. If so, good for you! We would love to hear from you.

You may still feel that that fostering a disabled child is not for you. The decision is yours. Expressing interest in fostering disabled children would not commit you to taking any child that you felt was not suitable.

We certainly hope that we have not put off anyone who might have been interested before they read this! We can promise you that many carers have found fostering disabled children rewarding and fulfilling, and all we ask is that you give some serious thought as to whether you could join them.

For more information or to talk over what you have heard or read, here or elsewhere, please contact the Fostering Team on **08000 730 418**. We look forward to hearing from you.