



Caring for Black and Mixed Heritage Children

With you every step of the way

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0800 040 7675
your fostering advice service

www.fosterline.info



The Black Minority Ethnic (BME) population of the UK at the time of the last census was approximately 8% of the entire population and many children of Black or mixed heritage (those who have one white parent and one Black or Asian parent), live in predominantly white communities unless they live in areas of high social and cultural integration such as London, Birmingham, Bradford and other large cities.

Research has shown that Black and minority ethnic children are over-represented in the care system in relation to the numbers of minority ethnic children in the general population. In addition, in many areas of the UK there is a shortage of foster carers with the same cultural or ethnic background as these children and consequently they will often be placed with foster carers from a different cultural, religious or ethnic background.

Identity is important for all children but is particularly crucial for Black and minority ethnic children placed in foster care. Black or Mixed Heritage children may be placed with Black or White foster carers and so foster carers need to think about what they can put in place to help the child with their identity as soon as possible.

Foster carers therefore need to be pro-active in encouraging mixed heritage children to understand and feel positive about the Black and minority ethnic part of their family background. People who have not taken time to consider identity may think that a mixed heritage child “looks white” and will therefore be viewed as white within their community and accepted. However research shows that mixed heritage children will generally be seen as Black children by the community they live in, and by wider society, and so need to be equipped by their carers for the racism and discrimination they may experience as a result of this.

Some mixed heritage children, particularly those who have lived with their white parent and have little or no contact with their Black parent or the Black parent’s family, may struggle to recognise or understand that they are Black and beginning to identify with other Black people, can have huge emotional consequences for the child. Helping a Black child to understand and feel positive about their cultural identity is crucial in enabling them to develop into an emotionally healthy adult.

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Providing emotional support

The trauma of separating a child from their birth parents, wider family and community is probably the worst trauma any child will ever experience. The effects should never be underestimated or ignored even if many years have passed.

Therefore, because of this disruption, Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children may face several new complex challenges not only physically but culturally, especially if they are placed with foster carers of a different ethnic group. Appropriate support, help and understanding are needed to negotiate these.

How you can support the child

It is important to:

- Encourage and enhance positive Black identity, culture, linguistic knowledge and skill
- Provide the child with the techniques and survival skills necessary for living in a racist society and encourage positive communication e.g. work together on developing skills to avoid conflict and encourage the child to be proud of who they are
- Intervene if a child is being laughed at or excluded because of the colour of their skin or the way they speak
- Try to ensure that the child is not isolated within the home or at school by including them in family activities and encouraging other children in the home to involve them in their activities
- Find out what special interests the child may have and speak to the school about encouraging the child to pursue this interest
- Speak with the child to identify any problems he/she may be experiencing, e.g. harassment, bullying and racism
- Seek out appropriate people or voluntary organisations who may have the skills to assist with providing emotional support
- Empower the child to develop their self-esteem by praising the positive things about them
- Encourage the child to seek out and engage in recreational activities.



Providing practical care

A child's identity is based on a range of factors including their ethnicity, language, family relationships and the community they live in. If they live in a culturally diverse area they will be aware of more people like themselves. However, if they are placed in a predominantly White area, they may feel isolated or excluded by their peers for being perceived to be "different".

Practical things, such as food and diet, hair care, social activities, education etc are also very important in forming a child's identity and below is some advice on how foster carers can meet these practical needs in regards to BME children.

Food and Diet

It is important to provide a Black child or young person in your care with foods that are familiar, both in the way they look and taste, so they can maintain their links or begin to build links with their cultural background. As carers you have a responsibility to ensure that whenever possible, this is maintained.

Some cultures are strict about the food they eat as well as how it is handled and prepared and where indicated this should be adhered to (see for example our specific advice on caring for Muslim children and young people). Some carers who are not used to preparing foods for children and young people from different backgrounds often can perceive this as too difficult, taking up too much time and cannot see the difference it makes in the way a dish is prepared and cooked.

It is therefore important that carers understand the cultural and religious beliefs behind many Black children and young people's diets. For some Black children and young people, strict religious and cultural beliefs may not have been followed with their birth families and they therefore do not perceive themselves as having any strict dietary need.

- Ask the child's social worker for information on the dietary needs of the child
- Check to see if the child or young person has any religious and cultural dietary restrictions, if they have any favourite foods and try involving other members of the household in the meal planning process
- Do not make assumptions
- Introduce any different dishes to other members of the household so the child or young person does not feel isolated at meal times
- If you have been given strict guidance about a child or young person's diet, do not substitute it with an alternative because you cannot see the difference it makes
- Try to develop your own understanding of foods from different countries and cultures
- If in doubt, ask! There are plenty of books available in local libraries, there are recipes online and your fostering service should be able to support you with this issue.



Skin Care

All children and adults need to pay attention to skin care. Everyone's skin differs in colour, texture and type. Appropriate care of a Black child or young person's skin is an important part of caring for their well-being and should not be neglected.

Black people's skin is often naturally dry, due to conditions in the climate and needs to be cared for by regularly moisturising the affected areas with creams and lotions.

This is even more important during the winter months when the skin is often more at risk from excess dryness. If neglected it can often develop cracks. Not recognising or acknowledging a Black child or young person's need for appropriate skin care products could have a long-term effect on their self-image and self-esteem.

Black skin can be quite sensitive. Therefore avoid using alcohol based products as these can further dry the skin. You can care for a Black child's skin by obtaining the right products e.g. oil based products, body lotions, and creams specifically developed for Black skin e.g. Cocoa Butter, can help to relieve skin dryness and keep skin supple. Lotion or cream should be applied on a daily basis (sometimes more than once a day) especially to the face, arms and legs and after bathing. Using bath oils in the bath is also helpful to keep the skin soft. Skin that has not been moisturised can often have an ashen appearance. If you are concerned seek advice from a doctor or pharmacist.

Exposure to the Sun

It is often thought that because of skin colour Black people cannot get sunburnt. This is a myth. Black people can and do frequently suffer from sunburn if exposed to the sun for long periods. Sun protection creams should be used to protect against sunburn. For babies and young children use a high factor sun cream.

Hair Care

In all cultures, hair grooming is an important part of a person's every day personal care and appearance and should not be overlooked. Adolescence is a time of great change that often presents some difficulties. For most young people, appearance matters and can become a real area of focus for them. It is important to feel good and look a certain way, as this often affects the way they are seen by others.

Too often the hair care of Black children and young people being looked after is neglected as many social workers and foster carers have little, or no knowledge about hair care and perceive it as being too difficult to manage.

A foster carer looking after a mixed heritage child (age 3) said:



“I did not know where to start with her hair, she was with me for several weeks, before I got up the courage to ask a Black mother at the school for advice. I knew it needed combing and that is all I did and bunched it into a ponytail, because it was so dry. She gave me some tips on what I should use and now we try a different style every day.”

An awareness of different religious traditions and beliefs is also important. For some Black children and young people, hair should not be cut i.e. Rastafarian and Sikhs. You should always check with the placing social worker and the child’s family about how to care for their hair and whether or not they can have it cut. If in doubt, seek specialist advice from a hairdresser specialising in black hair. There is also a great deal of advice regarding hair and skin products for Black people online.

Choosing positive learning – toys and books

Books and toys are often a child’s first link to learning and exploring the world around them. Therefore, when choosing play and reading materials, you should look to select quality items with good play and learning potential. In addition to this, it is important to be aware of the messages toys and books can carry. Many such items may present racist, sexist and discriminatory images.

In order for children to live in and play a positive role in a multi-cultural society, we need books which reflect and respect the diversity of culture, ethnic and religious backgrounds. At the early stage of their development children are eager to learn and absorb knowledge quickly. It is crucial therefore, that the visual and written images presented do not show discriminatory views.

When buying or selecting books, some points you will need to consider:

- Who is represented in the pictures? Are the images mainly of White people? Do they reflect the multi-cultural society in which we live?
- Look at the quality of the illustrations. Are the skin tones correct, physical features, hair textures and styles accurate?
- Do they give an accurate balance and up-to-date picture of today’s multicultural society?
- Do they show people from different ethnic groups in positive roles in everyday situations, rather than nominal roles and stereotypes?
- Do they give positive recognition to the cultural roots of different ethnic groups?



Music

Music plays a central role in all cultural expression. Therefore, it would be helpful to introduce children to different forms of music and instruments. Another good way to share and value a child's own language is to learn a few lines of a song or nursery rhymes. Look around for CDs of relevant music or traditional songs/ lullabies that you may be able to borrow from a Library. Look around for songs and stories from other cultures, not just those that may originate from White sources. Older children will already have their favourite bands or artists and it is important to respect that this is a key part of their cultural identity and to engage in this music with them wherever possible.

Social Media and the Internet

Social media is used by many young people to keep in touch with their friends, to follow groups and trends and to socialise. As with all internet based activity it is important to be aware of which sites your foster child is engaging with and to ensure their safety. However, social media can be an excellent way of helping a young person develop a sense of identity and belonging and should be encouraged within normal safety limits.

Useful Links and Resources

Black History Month 365

www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk

Website with news and resources for Black families throughout the year. There is a good section on fostering and adoption, lots of information about Black heroes, celebrities, food, music and education.

The Voice online

www.voice-online.co.uk

News, lifestyle, faith, food, culture, business. aimed at the Black Community

Black Beauty & Hair

www.blackbeautyandhair.com/master-mixed-race-hair

A lifestyle website with lots of hair and beauty tips for Black skin and hair

Black Children in Care: Health, Hair and Skin

www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Children-Care-Health-Hair/dp/0957647107

An invaluable resource for foster carers, adoptive parents, guardians and anyone caring for black and mixed heritage children. This guide provides practical and essential information about hair and skin care, health and nutrition, so that parents and carers can help their children look and feel good about themselves.

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