

## SPECIAL SAFETY ISSUES IN FOSTER HOMES

1015.19

### *Requirement*

Foster parents maintain a home environment that ensures the safety and well being of the children placed in their care. Foster parents are required to comply with the following safety requirements for children in foster care placement.

## 1015.19 PROCEDURES

### *DFCS Foster Home Safety Agreement*

The foster parent is required to sign the DFCS Foster Home Safety Agreement (See Form 29 in appendix N). The Case Manager reviews the DFCS Foster Home Safety Agreement with foster parents and obtains their signature(s) of agreement and approval at the following times:

- During the initial approval of the home at the time *Form 38 Agreement Between Family and County DFCS* is signed.
- At the time of the foster home re-evaluation.
- Whenever child safety concerns are at issue (discipline or foster care policy violations, etc).

### *Safe Supervision*

*Note:* For the purpose of this section on *Safe Supervision*, *supervision* refers to in-home or out-of-home, unreimbursed childcare; *occasional care* means care provided *once* a week or less with no more than three occurrences regardless of the timeframe ; *routine care* means care provided more than once a week, usually at designated times; *short-term care* means less than *four hours*.

Responsible supervision of children in care is required at all times. The Child Protective Services standards regarding the supervision of children in the homes of their parents or relatives are not applicable to children in foster care placement. Standards of care for children in placement are stricter due to the uniqueness of their situation, past experiences and the need to ensure their safety in out-of-home placements. This is the primary basis for the pre-service preparation and in-service training program (Continued Parent Development) for foster families.

The foster parent provides or arranges for care and supervision appropriate to the child's age, level of development and individual needs. A plan is established by the foster parent for the care and supervision of the child, as needed, by a *competent* and *reliable adult* in their absence due to *employment, training, or for personal situations*.

Policies and procedures regarding childcare needs during *training or employment* may be found in 1011.11 and 1011.12.

The following applies to *unreimbursed* substitute caregivers.

- *Substitute caregivers providing occasional, short-term, in-home/out-of-home* childcare are not required to undergo CPS screenings. However, upon completion of the third occurrence of care for any foster child having



been placed in the home (regardless of timeframe), the "occasional" provider becomes "routine" and is subject to the requirements below.

- *Substitute caregivers providing routine* in-home/out-of-home childcare are required to complete Form 316 and submit to CPS screenings, Sexual Offender's Registry, Pardons and Parole and Department of Corrections screening prior to providing care for the child.

Foster parents must be reasonably assured that any substitute caregiver possesses the necessary *skills* to manage the parenting and/or special needs of the child left in their care and is aware of and agrees to follow agency guidelines regarding supervision, discipline and other safety needs of the child.

Children are not left in the care of other minors. Persons providing reimbursed or non-reimbursed care for children must be at least eighteen (18) years of age or older

### *Supervision of Older Youth*

Generally speaking, reliable and competent youth, 13 years and older, may be left under their own supervision under certain circumstances and for short periods of time so as not to jeopardize their safety and well-being. At this stage in their lives, many youth are able to benefit from experiences that foster a sense of responsibility, independence and self-control. Situations requiring youth to be home alone after school hours or when foster parents are attending to short-term personal matters are acceptable within the limitations indicated.

The primary factor to consider in determining if youth may be left alone is their ability to function for short periods of time independent of a caretaker. The foster parent assures that the youth is aware of procedures to be taken in case of an emergency and has access to emergency contact numbers, including their own and a nearby relative, neighbor or friend. Other important criteria to consider include the following:

- Length of time in the Home.
- Judgment and level of maturity or development.
- Demonstration of dependability, responsibility and trustworthiness.
- History of emotional/psychological stability.
- History of running away and other status offenses.
- History of delinquent behavior.
- History of alcohol and substance abuse.
- Number of youth present in the home and their relationship with each other.
- Gender, number and the relationship of the youth to be left alone.
- History of sexual acting out.
- School performance.
- Safety of the home environment (firearm safety, water safety, any other potential hazards, etc.).
- Youth's ability to readily access foster parent or other identified person should the need arise.

The foster parent and Case Manager together determine the feasibility of leaving older youth alone in the foster home for short periods of time.

*Respite Care (see also 1016.32)*



Respite is a support service for foster parents who require some "time away" from their parenting responsibilities and may involve overnight care or day care. Children in DFCS approved foster homes and Private Agency foster homes are eligible for this service. Respite is paid at the child's current per diem rate, not to exceed five (5) days per fiscal year (taken individually or consecutively) for *day respite* and five (5) days per fiscal year for *overnight respite*.

Respite care (under Concurrent Per Diem) may also be used to support foster parent attendance at approved conferences when overnight or extended care may be needed. Note: Please refer to 1016.16 (concurrent per diem) when a foster parent's attendance at an approved conference is overnight or extended care is needed. These instances do not impact a foster parent's respite balance.

See 1016.32 Fiscal for details regarding the requirements for Respite care and procedures for claiming reimbursement.

#### *Day Respite*

Day respite is designed for less than 24-hour childcare that allows foster parents to deal with short-term situations of being away from home for such personal matters as hair appointments, unexpected family illness and similar circumstances. The respite care provider must meet the same requirements as Supplemental Supervision providers. (See 1011.11).

#### *Overnight Respite Care*

This type respite care is designed to give foster parents a needed break from parenting for such purposes as vacation, hospitalization, or any other circumstance that makes the foster parent unable to provide for the child's care in the home. The approved DFCS or Private Agency foster home must meet the DHR Minimum Standards for Foster Homes. See 1016.32 Fiscal for procedures and instructions to claim reimbursement.

*Note:* Due to their unique needs, children in foster care placement require the on-going care and supervision of caregivers who have undergone preparation and training adequate to meet their needs. Inherent in the process of "becoming" a foster parent is the understanding of and agreement with the impact that this experience will have on the life of the child and of the foster family.

#### *Violation of Supervision Requirements in Foster Homes*

Foster parents are made aware of the consequences of improper or inadequate supervision of children placed in their homes. Corrective Action measures are implemented or closure of the home may be necessary if there are serious risk factors to the child as a result of improper or inadequate supervision.

Foster parents must keep the agency informed of any changes in parental contact not approved by in the visitation plan.

#### *Water Safety*

Drowning is the second leading cause of injury-related deaths across the nation to



children ages one through fourteen. With this sobering statistic in mind, counties must take extra precaution when making placements in foster homes that have swimming pools or waterfront property. Any mobile child is a potential victim. As a result, the age, special needs and number of children in the home should guide decisions around placement in such foster homes.

Foster parents whose primary or alternate place of residence (vacation or country home, etc.) is equipped with an in-ground or aboveground swimming pool, or is situated on waterfront property are required to adhere to the following guidelines:

#### General Water Safety Guidelines

1. Know or learn how to swim. Swimming requirements are completed by foster parents during the first (1<sup>st</sup>) year of approval. Swimming requirements for previously approved homes are completed within one year of the effective date of this policy. Water safety requirements for homes with newly acquired swimming pools are completed by foster parents within one year of acquisition.
2. Complete the required CPR and First Aid training during the first year of approval. All previously approved foster homes that have not completed CPR and First Aid training are required to complete these courses as a part of the annual continued parent development requirements. CPR and First Aid certification should be kept current.

Complete training in a basic water rescue class during the first year of approval or as soon as the course is made available in the county, or is within reasonable driving distance. A basic water rescue is designed to teach recognition, prevention and response to water emergencies using non-swimming rescue methods. These type classes are generally offered by the Red Cross, community centers or aquatic centers.

3. Provide some form of *written verification* (this may be in the form of a signed statement, letter, certificate, etc. from the instructor) upon completion of the swimming, First Aid, CPR and Basic Water Rescue requirements.
4. Provide a *signed statement*, in the absence of official verification, affirming previously acquired swimming skills, if applicable, or the previous completion of a *Basic Water Rescue course*.
5. Enroll children in care, three (3) years and older, in a swimming class within one (1) year of the date of placement. The class must be taught by a certified instructor and, if necessary, is re-taken until the child learns to swim. The foster parent informs the Case Manager if a child is unable to complete the required swimming course for any reason. Case Managers must make foster parents aware of any known physical/corporal or emotional challenges of the child, which would impact their ability to complete the course.
6. Provide written documentation that children in the home have satisfactorily completed a swimming course that is taught by a certified swimming instructor or a signed statement affirming their observation of the child's previously acquired ability to swim.
7. Ensure that the swimming pool or waterfront area meets any local and/or state ordinances.
8. Ensure that the swimming pool and surrounding area are properly maintained and free



from danger.

9. Provide a cordless or pool phone, cellular phone, or poolside phone jack to eliminate the need to leave children unattended while answering the telephone indoors.
10. Equip the swimming pool with lifesaving and flotation devices such as reaching poles and ring buoys.
11. Provide direct adult supervision in the swimming pool or water area at all times. **CLOSE ADULT SUPERVISION IS THE KEY TO ENSURING ADEQUATE WATER SAFETY FOR CHILDREN. EVEN IF A CHILD KNOWS HOW TO SWIM, CLOSE ADULT SUPERVISION IS MANDATED!**
12. Ensure the inaccessibility of *in-ground or aboveground swimming pools* by isolating the pool from the home with a fence or through the use of a pool safety cover. See appendix O-19.

#### *Safety Guidelines for In-ground Pools*

- The fence must surround all sides of the pool, must be at least four (4) feet in height and must isolate the pool from the home. The fence should have no vertical or horizontal openings that are more than four (4) inches wide and should be of such structure that a young child cannot climb through or under the fence. The fence must have a gate that locks. See Appendix O-19.
- Pool safety covers must meet ASTM Standards (See Appendix O-19) and must be installed, used and maintained according to manufacturer's specifications. Pool covers are kept free of standing water and are completely removed when the pool is in use.

#### *Guidelines for Aboveground Pools*

- The side structure of an aboveground pool may be used to meet the fence requirement.
- Where an above-ground pool structure is used as a fence, or where the fence is mounted on top of an aboveground pool structure, the pool is made inaccessible when not in use by at least one of the following: 1) securing with a pool safety cover that meets ASTM Standards (See Appendix O); 2) by removing or making the steps or ladder inaccessible; 3) by surrounding the steps or ladder with a small fence that meets the above fencing guidelines. See Appendix O-19.

#### *Guidelines for Wading or "Kiddie Pools"*

- Wading or "kiddie" pools should be used according to manufacturer's instructions, and maintained and used in a manner that safeguards the lives and health of young children. These small pools should be emptied and stored away when not in use to prevent the accumulation of water and other unsanitary debris.

#### *Guidelines for On-property Ponds*

- Homes with on-property swimming ponds must comply with the above General Water Safety Guidelines 1-12.

**NOTE:** Families who were previously approved, or who have already begun the process of approval (in training or home study process) prior to the effective date of this policy may



continue under the guidelines which were in effect prior to the effective date of this policy. Previous guidelines permitted a waiver from the County Director for the use of alarms, sensors and locks if the pool was not isolated from the home with a fence and locking gate.

If any foster family acquires a swimming pool or *replaces a fence* that surrounds an existing pool after the effective date of this policy, the water safety guidelines contained in this policy will apply.

Homes approved after the effective date of this policy must comply with all water safety requirements contained in this policy for in-ground and aboveground pools and on-property swimming ponds. Families are made aware of this water safety requirement prior to beginning pre-service preparation or training.

Although this policy specifically refers to in-ground and above ground pools and waterfront property, families with *family hot tubs* and *spas* are required to take *substantial safety measures* to ensure the safety of children placed in the foster home. Specified safety measures should be *documented in the narrative of the foster home study or foster home record*. Supervision is key in preventing water accidents.

#### Motor Vehicle Safety

Ensure foster parents' awareness and understanding of the following requirements regarding motorized vehicles and safety helmets:

1. Foster parents are required to transport every child placed in their care, under age 8 years, in a federally approved child safety seat that is used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. The county director/designee for the county of legal responsibility may grant a waiver to this requirement upon receiving verification from the child's primary health provider (doctor) that the child has a medical condition that prevents the use of a child safety seat or that the child is greater than 4'9" (57 inches) in height.
2. To protect young children from air bag injuries, foster parents are required to transport children 12 years and under in the rear seat of the vehicle, with seat belts buckled up.
3. Foster parents are prohibited from allowing children and youth under the age of 18 to ride in the bed of a pickup truck. The County Director/designee may provide *waivers* when children wish to participate in parades, hayrides and similar events.
4. Prior to allowing a child to operate a motor vehicle, foster parents must contact the child's Case Manager and comply with all agency policy regarding the driving of motor vehicles by youth in placement.
5. Foster parents are required to take extra precaution in allowing a child under 18 years of age to operate or ride as a passenger on a motorcycle, a motorbike, an all terrain vehicle, a high-speed water craft or other similarly motorized vehicles. These high-speed vehicles can be particularly challenging to operate; therefore, reasonable care and caution should be applied when considering a child's participation in such activities.

**Note:** In responding to a foster parent's request for guidance, the Case Manager takes under consideration the child's psychological, medical and developmental needs. Determine the type and safety of the vehicle and it's



suitability for the child, as well as the vehicle operators and supervision plan. Discuss any restrictions (i.e., no use of public roads, daytime riding only, no racing or hot-rodding) and other safety measures as helmets, seat belts, flotation devices and any other manufacturer's recommended safety gear. Children should have reasonable opportunities to engage in play and wholesome recreational activities.

6. All children in care, regardless of age, must be individually secured (one child to a seat belt) by an appropriately fitting seat belt when being transported in a motorized vehicle.
7. Foster parents must never leave children 12 years and younger or children who are medically, emotionally, psychologically, or behaviorally challenged unattended in motor vehicles.

#### Bicycle Safety (Helmet)

1. Foster parents must provide a safety helmet for any child who is operating a bicycle or is riding as a passenger on a bicycle on a road, bicycle path or sidewalk. Helmets are also required for children when operating or riding as a passenger on other types of vehicles (excluding an automobile), i.e., all-terrain vehicles, motorbikes, small motor craft, etc.
2. Foster parents are required to provide helmets that are properly fitted and securely fastened.

#### Fire Arm Safety

1. All firearms in the foster home are kept under lock and key and are inaccessible to children at all times. As an added safety measure, any one of the reliable gun-safety mechanisms available commercially (trigger guard lock, etc.) may also be used. See Foster Parent Manual for a list of the types of gun safety devices that may be used.
2. All ammunition should be locked away and stored in a separate location from firearms in the home.
3. \*Foster parents never allow children in care to handle any type firearm.
4. Keys to locked storage devices are to be kept in the possession of an adult or reasonably secured from children.

**\*NOTE:** Youth ages thirteen (13) years and older, who have successfully complied with all applicable hunting license requirements for Georgia, may engage in hunting activities, while under the *direct supervision* of the foster parent or other approved adult. The foster parent/adult is also required to be in compliance with Georgia hunting license requirements. Georgia requires completion of a hunter education course (includes safety guidelines) for all persons born after January 1, 1961. The County Director/designee gives prior approval, taking under consideration the psychological and emotional capacity of the child as well as any developmental or behavioral needs. If parental rights have not been terminated, prior written approval must be obtained from the birth parent.

#### Animals

Georgia law requires that all dogs, cats, and ferrets be vaccinated for rabies. Re-



immunizations are required either annually or triennially depending on the vaccine. Foster homes with exotic animals or wildlife (chimpanzees, snakes, raccoons, large mammals) will require a health and suitability statement from a veterinarian, and approval by the County Director. However, any issues or concerns related to any pet (type, size, quantity etc...) should be thoroughly discussed and documented during the assessment and re-evaluation process.

#### **Dog Safety**

1. Children are the primary victims of dog bites. Dogs with which the child is familiar usually inflict such bites. In the absence of substantive dog safety laws in Georgia, foster parents are required to exercise reasonable safety precautions when children are around pets. Foster parents are required to take the following measures to protect the children placed in their home:
2. Monitor children when they are around animals.
3. Refrain from bringing into the home, after approval, any type or breed of animal that has a known history of violence and/or aggressiveness toward people. The Case Manager gives serious consideration to this issue when assessing safety factors in the foster home.
4. Safely secure animals that have a history of violence and/or aggressiveness toward people in a cage, fence or other similar enclosure.
5. When acquiring a pet for the home, choose a breed or type that has, at the least, a history of being people-friendly.
6. Provide opportunities and instruction to children in care regarding safe socialization with people-friendly breeds of animals.
7. Report immediately to the agency any acts of violence toward a child in care or others by an animal in the foster home.
8. Carefully review the Foster Parent Manual for information regarding animal safety.

#### **Fire Safety**

1. Gas heaters in the foster home must be vented to avoid fire and health hazards. However, unvented, fuel-fired heaters equipped with oxygen depletion safety shut-off systems may be operated in foster homes. As noted in the requirements for the initial approval of the home, such homes are approved for the placement of no more than three (3) unrelated children or in an approved Relative Foster Home. Working carbon monoxide detectors must be installed in these homes. However, it is a good safety practice that all homes with gas appliances (stove, fireplace and water heaters) have carbon monoxide detectors.
2. Working smoke alarms must be installed in the home. Ideally, smoke alarms should be located on each level of the home and outside sleeping areas.

#### **General Environmental Safety**

1. The foster home and surrounding property must be kept reasonably clean and uncluttered, properly maintained, and free of safety and health hazards, and uncontrolled rodents and insects.



2. All hazardous substances including, but not limited to, flammable and poisonous substances, medications and industrial cleaning supplies are stored out of the reach of children.

#### **Minimum Standards**

To ensure the overall safety of the child, foster homes are required to meet the Minimum Standards for DFCS Family Foster Homes that were initially established by the State Board for Children and Youth and incorporated into the policy of the Board of the Department of Human Resources. To ensure compliance with these standards, Case Manager implements the following:

1. Review the Minimum Standards for Family Foster Homes found in Appendix B of the Social Services Manual.
2. Inform the foster parent of any observed violations of the Minimum Standards requirements, especially those that pose a risk or potential risk to the health and safety of the child in the home and, if possible, provide measures for correction.
3. Notify the Supervisor in writing of any Minimum Standards violations observed during foster home visits and the outcome of any discussion with the foster parent regarding observations. File a copy of written report in the foster home record.
4. Provide follow-up to ensure the foster home's compliance with Minimum Standards requirements.

#### **1015.19 PRACTICE ISSUES**

When children are placed outside the home for various reasons of abuse and/or neglect, their health and safety are of paramount concern to the State. It is the responsibility of the foster parent, or other caretakers, and the agency (Case Manager and/or Supervisor) to take all measures within their power to reduce the level of risk to the child while in care. The safety of the child must become as much a priority for the child in placement as it is in the home of the birth parent.

Accidental drowning and motor vehicle accidents are among the leading causes of unintentional fatalities for children and youth ages 0-24. Children are the number one victims of dog bites, and firearms claim the lives of an inordinate number of children each year. Given the seriousness of these statistics, foster parents must be guided in changing any attitudes or behaviors that put the child's safety at risk and acquiring injury prevention strategies that promote the safety of the children in their care.

The county department will assist the foster parent in locating resources for free swimming lessons. If free resources are not available, reasonable expenses should be allowed. County departments provide foster parents with easy access to child safety seats and bicycle helmets. Expenses incurred by foster parents in meeting agency approval requirements are reimbursable. (See Section 1016 Fiscal.) Foster parents are required to obtain prior approval before incurring costs that require reimbursement.