



Think the Unthinkable; children can be abused by carers

What is Thinking the Unthinkable?

“Safeguarding is thinking the unthinkable and then figuring out how to reduce the probability of the unthinkable happening” (Graham Fawcett)

Children rarely disclose abuse and neglect directly to practitioners which makes identifying abuse and neglect difficult for practitioners across agencies. Practitioners need to develop relationships with children, away from carers, and practice ‘respectful uncertainty’ to any information they receive, keep an open mind and think objectively about the evidence presented, even if this may be challenging and difficult to imagine.

Where Can I Get More Information?

- [Warwickshire Interagency Procedures](#)
- [Professional Curiosity 7 Minute briefing](#)
- [Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse of Children in care in East Midlands in 2019](#)
- [NSPCC Serious Case Reviews](#)

What is the Background?

When children are removed from their birth families and placed in a foster placement or adoptive placement, there is a natural assumption that the children are now safe from harm. Carers have been vetted and are monitored and reviewed. However, some foster carers and adoptive parents do abuse or cause harm to children; as professionals **we must think the unthinkable.**

What Should I Consider?

- Remember, children **can** be abused in foster care
- Always, **think the unthinkable** and be professionally curious
- Always seek to obtain the views and feelings of the child
- Be open-minded, don't take everything at face value
- Never assume and, be wary of assumptions already made

What is the National Picture?

Across England in 2018/2019, a total of 2,705 allegations of abuse were made against foster carers, which is the highest number since 2014/15. More than half the allegations, a total of 1,570, related to physical abuse. 530 allegations were for emotional abuse, 430 for neglect and 175 were for sexual abuse.

What is the Legal Context for Foster Carers?

They are expected to adhere to the standards of behaviour set out in National Minimum Standards; which state children in foster care:

- have their wishes & feelings listened to & taken into account
- deserve to be treated as a good parent would treat their own children
- have the central importance of the child's relationship with their foster carer acknowledged

What have we Learned from CSPR's?

- Information provided by abusive foster carers is not corroborated; with foster carers diagnosis being accepted by practitioners
- Foster carers are rarely challenged when they present as controlling or opinionated in meetings; instead the behaviour is accepted as “*just the way they are*”
- There is a potential for fixed thinking when children are in long term placements