

- **Carer retention:** Carers who had a 'buddy' or were involved in support groups were more likely to have a 'positive attitude towards' and less likely to cease fostering. Sinclair et al. (2004) argued that perceived support interacts with stresses and life events to influence carers' decisions to continue or cease fostering.
- **Carer's mental health:** Carer's reflections in the study suggested that peer support was 'essential' for their mental health (e.g. Murray et al., 2011) whether accessed via support groups or individual contact. The opportunity to discuss issues with a sympathetic peer was particularly important for carers.
- **Stability of placements:** Well supported foster carers provide stable placements for children in their care. The Rees Centre quoted a carer in Hudson and Levasseur's (2002) study who stated that emotional support was particularly valued when stress levels were high and they needed to talk things through with another carer without fear of being judged as 'not coping'.

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Irish Foster Care Association

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**Irish Foster Care Association,**  
Unit 23, The Village Green, Tallaght, Dublin 24  
Tel: 01 4599 474    info@ifca.ie    www.ifca.ie



IRISH FOSTER  
CARE ASSOCIATION  
SUPPORT  
SERVICE



Irish Foster Care Association

## Support Service

The term 'foster carer' throughout this leaflet refers to all individuals and families involved in foster care in Ireland, be it general, relative, emergency, day, respite, private, high support or other forms of foster care.

The Irish Foster Care Association's Support Service offers independent and professional support in all fostering situations. The aim of the service is to offer the best and most appropriate support during difficult times by seeking to make the process easier by providing clarity and guidance for all those involved in foster care.

IFCA Volunteer Support Workers provide a professional and high quality support service to complement the aims and objectives of the organisation and its members. The service is confidential, responsive and personal. The level of support varies depending on the need but may include any or all of the following services:

**Advocacy:** Providing independent and objective advice, ensuring foster carers are adequately informed of their rights. Practical assistance with regard to understanding and responding to written reports and ensuring foster carers are well represented and remain engaged in the process. Accompaniment to meetings where appropriate, can be considered on request. IFCA also advocates for changes and improvements in foster care through its analysis of recurring trends and working in collaboration with relevant statutory bodies.

**Mediation:** Mediation involves professional independent support for disputes that may arise during the investigation of allegations or other areas of concern, to ensure all parties remain constructively engaged and to facilitate the voicing of all perspectives. IFCA can provide assistance in ensuring all parties are appropriately informed regarding the process, facilitating improved communication and dialogue between all concerned. IFCA may be able to assist in providing advice and information regarding the mediation process.

**Emotional and Psychological Support:** Fostering is complex and issues such as placement endings, whether planned or unplanned, including responding to allegations or complaints can be very distressing for all involved. Telephone support and a listening ear are a fundamental part of the service. Assistance in sourcing a range of resources and signposting to relevant appropriate services can be offered. Members who have availed of IFCA's Legal Expenses Insurance scheme also have access to a 24hr independent, confidential Counselling Helpline. Details on how to access this service can be obtained by contacting the helpline.

## Nationwide Support Volunteer Service

The Irish Foster Care Association provides a Telephone Helpline from Monday to Wednesday and Friday from 11am to 3pm.

# Telephone Helpline

## (01) 458 5123

(also email: [support@ifca.ie](mailto:support@ifca.ie))

The Telephone helpline operates from the IFCA office in Tallaght providing a first point of contact to foster carers and all those with a query or question about fostering.

The Telephone Helpline can provide practical information and advice regarding any aspect of fostering as well as a supportive listening ear.

For more details re hours of Telephone Helpline, please see the IFCA Website ([www.ifca.ie](http://www.ifca.ie))

**Referral Service.** For matters of a more complex nature, more prolonged or detailed assistance may be required. When appropriate, our helpline volunteers will consult with the Support Service Development Worker to determine if further support can be offered by means of a referral to a specific Support Volunteer.

## Support Volunteers

In addition to its existing Branch and Regional structure, IFCA has expanded our panel of specially trained Support Volunteers located in all parts of Ireland.

All our Support Volunteers are themselves either long standing experienced foster carers or possess significant relevant experience and expertise in their own right.

Our Support Volunteers will be available to assist and support carers over time with more complex issues or matters of a longer duration.

The Support Services of the Irish Foster Care Association are designed to assist all carers experiencing difficulty by:

- Providing an objective, non-judgemental, and supportive environment in which to discuss and explore issues of concern.



- Providing balanced, good quality advice and information regarding all aspects of foster care.
- Facilitating improved communication and dialogue between all concerned.
- Assisting foster carers in identifying constructive strategies for resolving their concerns.
- Supporting carer confidence in working towards positive solutions.

All IFCA Volunteer Support Volunteers will have, at a minimum, completed a Certificate in Counselling & Psychotherapeutic Skills & Practice course.

## Research

The National Standards for Foster Care, 2003 sets four principles that are key to ensuring foster carers can provide a safe and nurturing environment for the children in their care. These are:

1. Assessment and approval of foster carers
2. Supervision and support
3. Training
4. Reviews of foster carers

Research acknowledges the importance of support to foster carers. (Sinclair et al. 2005) sees support for the foster carer as a moral requirement while Osmond et al. (2008) argued that foster carers should be recognised as an essential component of the therapeutic alliance and a fully-fledged member of the child treatment team.

The Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, University of Oxford, in their 2013 international literature review on peer contact between foster carers, found the most frequently cited benefit to carers of peer support was the chance to learn from the experience of other carers. The Review identified a number of key outcomes for carers who accessed peer support.