

## Providing Appropriate Supervision - Whatever That Means

*Author: Lee Oesterle*

Supervision of foster children is such a basic and critical component of providing foster care. It can seem so common sense and, for the most part, it is about common sense. Because foster parents are taking care of someone else's child there can be a tendency to raise the level of what is expected for what constitutes "appropriate supervision".

Let's start with the rules for foster parents in Colorado regarding the supervision of foster children. This won't take long.

### **7.708.31 Care of Foster Children [Rev. eff. 4/1/05]**

Foster parents shall provide supervision and care appropriate to each child's age, level of development and ability to accept independence and responsibility".

There you have it - that is pretty much it.

There are not a lot of rules or guidelines available to describe or define "appropriate supervision". That is because it is such an individualized concept. That is also why Kids Crossing has created this training component for our foster parents.

### Kids Crossing Supervision Policy

At least one foster parent is to be responsible for the child or adolescent at all times. At any time when foster parents are unable for any reason (including, but not limited to, illness or temporary absence from the home) to provide supervision and care, they shall arrange for a qualified substitute who is familiar with these rules and with foster children in care to provide temporary supervision and care to foster children in the foster family care home. If in care for up to 6 hours, it is preferable that the provider of substitute care be at least sixteen years old. Exceptions based on maturity can be made with concurrence of the foster parent and the certifying authority, but in no case should the provider of substitute care be less than 14 years of age. If care is provided for more than 6 hours including overnight and respite care, the substitute care provider must be at least 18 years of age, trained in first aid and CPR, and must have completed Colorado Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Central Registry for Child Protection background checks.

Biological children, as well as adopted children, under the age of eighteen may not be left in charge of foster children without the written consent of the child's caseworker and the foster home supervisor. Moreover, foster children are never to be left in charge of other children in the foster care home.

Foster children, no matter what the age, shall not be left unsupervised unless a caseworker has given prior permission. Caseworker permission should be in writing and documented on a *Teen Supervision Contract* form.

### Lack of Information About Foster Children

One of the challenges for foster parents is the lack of information they have when a child is placed into their home. So, how do you decide what is appropriate supervision for this child if it is to be based on the developmental level of the child and the child's ability to accept independence and accountability? This is what the rule says you must do.

Here are some ideas:

- Safety is the primary consideration - as is when caring for any child.
- You should observe the foster child in different situations to begin the process of learning what level of supervision a child needs.
- "Listen" to the child's behaviors. If when you leave the foster child to play with your own children unsupervised it results in someone crying - then supervision may need to be put in place for this type of activity.
- When in doubt - be on the safe side. Provide more supervision than you think may be necessary until you are sure what is needed.
- When you get the chance (such as at an IceBreaker) ask the parents if there are any special concerns or considerations as far as supervising their child.
- Use "universal precautions" when caring for children you don't know anything about - and even when you know something about the children being placed in your home.
- Keep in mind that if your house is safe for your own children - it may not be safe for foster children being placed into your home.

### Universal Precautions

- This is actually a term used primarily in the medical field to describe how precautions should be taken to prevent an HIV infection when caring for patients. Medical practitioners do not wait to find out if a patient has HIV before donning protective gloves and masks when they are going to come into contact with a patient's blood or other bodily fluids.
- In foster care the term is used to describe how precautions should be taken to prevent a foster child from harming themselves or someone else in the foster home.
- There are times when a child being referred for placement in your home will have a known history of sexual acting out. In these situations foster parents know to provide an increased level of supervision. But, what about the children that come into care that have these issues and no one knows?

- An important precaution is to prepare your children and the foster children for potential problems:
  - You can have rules in place that are taught to all of the children in your home. When a new child is placed into your home a family meeting takes place where these rules are gone over for the new child and to reinforce them with all of the children.
  - "No games or activities with the lights out" or "no games or activities behind closed doors" are two examples. Children are instructed to let an adult know immediately if someone wants to break the rules or does break the rules.
  - You cannot be everywhere at once. You cannot keep children from being alone with each other - if only for moments at a time. You don't want to have to know what is going on every second in your house. Having these types of rules can help involve everyone in the house to ensure everyone is safe.

### What Can Go Wrong?

I apologize in advance to those who already understand what I am going to be discussing in this next section. My problem is it is impossible for me to know who gets it and who doesn't get it. Some of the examples I will be using involved foster parents who Kids Crossing believed they would never have done something like they did. So, we have to give everyone this information.

- It is against the law to leave children unattended in the car - even just for a moment to run something into the Kids Crossing office. There is no worse place than our parking lot to leave children unattended in the car. There are more mandatory reporters walking through our parking lot than just about anywhere else. A DHS worker walked by - reported it - and the foster parent was founded for neglect. Since no children were harmed the foster parent was able to appeal and after six months was able to continue as a foster parent.
- Foster parents left a 17 year old boy alone at the foster home while they went to Las Vegas for the weekend. They left him with money, food, and a phone number of a family friend to call in an emergency. A parent may do this if the boy is their own son. These foster parents lost their license to do foster care for neglect - "lack of supervision".

Note: There is also a lesson about "keeping secrets" in this example above. The foster parents were hoping that the boy would not tell they had left him alone - he apparently liked the plan. But, a week later when the foster parents grounded him for something - he told our staff member. I don't know why anyone would trust a foster child to keep such an important secret.

- A twelve year old girl was placed into a Kids Crossing foster home. The foster parents were given information that she may have sexually assaulted her younger nephew. The foster parents were informed not to leave this girl alone with younger children. After the child was in care for six months the foster parents went to visit their family and took this girl along. The girl was allowed to play alone with a number of younger children and she was discovered molesting a six year old little boy. The foster parents ended up having a founded case of neglect filed against them for "lack of supervision". Supervision is not something that just happens in the foster home.

- A seventeen year old girl had to be rushed to the hospital because of a drug overdose. She was treated at the emergency room and the admitted to a psychiatric hospital. The girl reported that she had gotten into the medicine box (which she says had been left unlocked) and had taken a number of pills from her prescription bottle and a number of pills from another girl's prescription bottle. In checking the pills left in the bottles and comparing with the med logs - it was determined that pills were missing. The good news - the girl was OK. The bad news - the foster parents had a founded case of neglect filed against them - for medical neglect.

### What If I Leave a Child Alone at Home - Unsupervised?

You are putting the child and your license at risk if you purposefully leave a child at home with no supervision. But, we know there are times when children are left alone due to an emergency or some other unforeseen event.

- When a child is left alone at home unintentionally you need to notify Kids Crossing immediately - any time day or night.
  - Let us know why - you were late coming home because of an accident and no one was home when Johnny got home from school, for example.
  - Kids Crossing will document what happened - to decrease the chances of anyone (like a parent or GAL) making the incident into a licensing issue.
- If an emergency arises and you know a child will be alone at the home, then call Kids Crossing immediately. Telling us before it happens is even better.
- Even if you do intentionally leave a child alone at home it is best to notify Kids Crossing immediately - any time day or night. We will work with you best we can - depending on the situation and depending on if anything bad happened to the child.
- There are times when a caseworker will approve an adolescent being left alone (or with other children in the home) for specified amounts of time and/or for specific reasons. Please take a look at the "Teen Supervision Contract" included in this packet. If you have any questions, please contact your Coordinator.
  - Real example: Two teen foster boys left alone for two hours. Foster parent comes home to find police cars and a fire engine at her house. The boys got into a fight. The fight ended with one boy stabbing the other with a knife.
  - Because there was a "Teen Supervision Contract" for both boys that allowed them to be home alone and with each other for up to two hours at a time, the investigating worker from DHS did not find "lack of supervision" because of the "Teen Supervision Contract".

### Safety Plans

These plans are guidelines we put in place when we have information about a child or youth being a risk to others or in reaction to an incident at a foster home that causes concern for someone's safety in the home.

- We must always be realistic about the level of supervision that can be provided in a foster home. A foster home is a family environment and it cannot be ensured that a child will be supervised 24 hours a day seven days a week.
- Incidents with these children and youth even occur when they are in a residential facility, psychiatric hospital, or detention center where there is round the clock staff.
- A foster parent should not agree to a level or type of supervision that is impossible to provide. Kids Crossing staff should not allow this and should not ask for this from foster parents.
- When a foster parent signs a Safety Plan - it is critical that the foster parent follow the plan.
- When a child's behavior causes a safety plan to be implemented, this should be reflected on the NBC or DOC paperwork.
- Please take a look at the "Safety Plan" form included in this packet. If you have any questions, please contact your Coordinator.

### Sexual Behaviors

Children are sexual beings. It is not unusual for foster parents to observe some type of sexual behavior from a foster child. Some behaviors are normal and some are evidence of a child being a danger to others. Report and discuss what is observed with your Coordinator or the child's therapist (if there is one).

- After sexual behavior is observed there is usually a need for increased supervision. It may be an educational issue or a therapeutic issue or a behavior management issue. These different issues are often then addressed in a Safety Plan.
- As foster parents you are "mandatory reporters". If you observe a child sexually abusing another child or if a child tells you they have been sexually abused (by anyone) you are required to report that to the child's caseworker (or the Department's after-hours pager). If you are not sure what to do - contact Kids Crossing - day or night.
- There is a training called "informed supervision". Foster parents who take in juvenile sex offenders are required to complete this training. Other foster parents may be asked to complete this training if a particular child in their home is assessed to be a possible risk to other children.

- The issue of sexual behaviors is a difficult one - there are so many variables to consider. The foster parent's responsibility is to let others know what is going on. If nothing else - if in doubt - call Kids Crossing - day or night.
- Children who have sexually acted out against other children or vulnerable persons do not look dangerous and they don't act dangerous. In fact, they may be the best behaved children you will ever have in your home. Don't be fooled - follow the Safety Plan until you are instructed to no longer follow the Safety Plan.
- One of the most common mistakes foster parents make with children who have been identified as a risk to sexually act out is to think they are no longer a risk because "he has been in my home for over a year and we never saw any problems". There may have been problems the foster parents were not aware of - sexual acting out almost always occurs in secrecy. There may not have been problems because a Safety Plan was in place and followed so that the child had no opportunity to act out. Don't be fooled - follow the Safety Plan until you are instructed to no longer follow the Safety Plan.

#### Conclusion

Let's end where we started - with the rules for foster parents in Colorado regarding the supervision of foster children.

#### [7.708.31 Care of Foster Children \[Rev. eff. 4/1/05\]](#)

Foster parents shall provide supervision and care appropriate to each child's age, level of development and ability to accept independence and responsibility".

**Providing Appropriate Supervision Quiz**  
**Credit 1.5**  
**(To be completed and turned into Kids Crossing)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please define "Appropriate Supervision" for foster children: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

True/False

\_\_\_\_\_ It is appropriate for foster parents to supervise their foster children in the same manner as they would supervise their own biological children.

\_\_\_\_\_ If foster parents want to go out to dinner without their foster children, it is appropriate to use a 16 year old trustworthy neighbor to watch their foster children for less than 6 hours.

\_\_\_\_\_ If a child comes into a foster home with known risk of sexually acting out and a safety plan, however, the foster parents after a period of 6 months, never witness any of these unsafe behaviors—It is then okay to for the parents to disregard the safety plan and allow the child to sleep in room with other children and/or be unattended with younger children.

\_\_\_\_\_ Special training, called "informed supervision" is necessary if a foster parent intends to have children in their home at risk of sexually acting out or children who have been adjudicated sex offenders.

\_\_\_\_\_ It is possible to supervise a child 100% of the time.

\_\_\_\_\_ The law approves for parents to leave their child in the car unattended if the time period is less than 5 minutes and if the temperature outside is less than 65 degrees.

If a foster parent is leaving on vacation for a week, is it recommended to:

- (a) Leave the foster children at Aunt Suzy's home because she has successfully completed all of her background checks
- (b) Notify Kids Crossing and caseworkers of the foster children that you are leaving.
- (c) To leave Aunt Suzy in charge at the licensed foster home.
- (d) All of the above
- (e) Only "b" and "c"

Foster children may be left alone overnight at the age of 16:

- (a) Never, for any reason
- (b) If there is a completed and approved Teen Supervision Contract in their case file
- (c) Only with an approved "qualified substitute" in a licensed foster home.

Situations that are appropriate to call Kids Crossing after-hours on the emergency cell phone/pager, include:

- (a) A foster child is injured and requires emergency medical attention.
- (b) A foster child returns from a visit with his bio parent and has noticeable bruises.
- (c) A foster child runs away and is gone for over 3 hours.
- (d) There is a family emergency and the foster parent needs to leave town for 1 week.
- (e) Medications are missing from the med box.
- (f) All of the above

What is a Teen Supervision Contract and why is it important? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What does "universal precaution" mean, in terms of foster care? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please list three ways of taking "universal precautions" with a new foster child:

(a) \_\_\_\_\_

(b) \_\_\_\_\_

(c) \_\_\_\_\_

Please define "Mandatory reporting:" \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please list three things you learned from this training and how this information will have a direct impact on how you supervise foster children:

(a) \_\_\_\_\_

(b) \_\_\_\_\_

(c) \_\_\_\_\_