

Reunification - The Trusted Adult

Identifying a trusted adult for the child or young person

It is important that *throughout* the assessment and return home process, children have a trusted adult who they can talk to and who can support them to express their views and concerns about reunification. One study (Farmer et al 2011) found that a third of the children had confided in no one once they had returned home.

The role of trusted adult can be played by the social worker, who should make every effort to build a relationship with the child. However, some children may be reluctant to raise concerns with their social worker for fear that it may trigger a change in plan.

The social worker should ensure that at least one trusted adult has been identified by and for the child. This could be a foster carer, relative, teacher or mentor and it should be someone who can continue supporting the child if they return home.

If a child does not have anyone currently in their life to fulfil this role, they could be offered an independent worker or advocate, who should be able to remain involved throughout the process. Introducing this person at the start will allow time for the relationship to develop.

Benefits to the child of having a trusted adult

Engaging trusted adults as a source can help in both supporting the child to build a positive relationship with their social worker and speaking for them when they are unable.

When a child is pre-verbal, workers can predict what a child would want and need for their future and can use the views of others and observations of attachments to formulate views. Remember the assessment is not a one off event, rather a process and therefore space needs to be given for children/young people to change their minds.

Returning home is as complex and stressful for children as separation (Bullock et al 1998). It is a major transition and children will need support to work through feelings of confusion, anger, failure and fear of subsequent rejection or maltreatment.

The assessing social worker should emphasise to the child that if they have any concerns prior to or on returning home, they must tell them/ another adult who they trust.

Social workers must also understand that many children will not tell anyone their concerns, and they may express their distress through different behaviours which the worker and other professionals should be alert to. If the child has an advocate and/or a trusted adult, they should be involved in preparing the child for return home.