

Foster carers facing allegations of abuse 'need better support'

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Credit: Anete Lusina from Pexels

New research finds that foster carers who have faced unproven allegations of abuse from the children they are looking after often have little support afterwards.

The study drew on 190 records of unproven [allegations](#) against foster carers from all over England. It found that just over half (55%) of foster carers subjected to an unproven abuse allegation by the child were offered support on the day they learnt about the claim – usually from the relevant local authority, or fostering companies or charities involved. In terms of independent support (from other organisations set up to help carers), 40% of carers said they had not received any support at all following the allegation. The study also finds that only 23% of carers in the sample had received any specific training beforehand about how to deal with allegations, despite the publication of the government's National Minimum Standards for fostering services. These stipulate that foster parents should receive 'relevant support services' and that such investigations should provide effective protection for the child, and at the same time support the person who is the subject of the allegation.

The findings by the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education come at a time when retention and recruitment of foster carers is critical. Local authorities across the UK were contacted by the researchers and asked to fill in forms about allegations made without revealing individuals' identities. The unproven allegation cases studied were those that had been resolved within two calendar years, 2013-14. In a follow up stage, the researchers requested local authorities to contact carers to see if they would be prepared to be interviewed. Researchers then conducted face-to-face interviews with 30 foster carers who agreed to take part, as well as the relevant social workers and fostering care managers involved.

The study, *The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers*, says many of the foster carers said they had learned about the allegations of abuse through a phone call from the provider but did not receive face-to-face support from social workers or other agencies until a week or more later. Some of those interviewed spoke of the harrowing experience of feeling totally alone while waiting to hear from the police.

Professor Judy Sebba, joint author of the report and director of the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, says: 'This study clearly shows the huge, emotional impact upon foster carers when an allegation is made. In the worst cases, it can result in the breaking up of foster families, income loss and a subsequent deterioration of health. These findings should provide a way forward by highlighting the importance of independent [support](#) to every foster carer facing allegations. The report also underlines the need for better high quality training for both foster carers and social worker that looks specifically at the issue of allegations.'

Existing research shows that there are around 2,000 to 2,500 allegations made by foster [children](#) every year, from which up to a quarter are later confirmed. More than half of these relate to allegations of physical abuse. The Oxford report mentions previous research showing that in 12 months leading up to the end of March 2015, out of 44,625 fostering households, 2,420 allegations were made by children about their foster carers. Over half (58%) of the allegations referred to physical abuse, such as bruising or hitting; 19% concerned emotional abuse or bullying behaviour by the carer; 15% of the allegations were related to neglect; while 8% concerned sexual [abuse](#).

The report is being launched in London today. The study is the first to examine specifically cases of unproven allegations and their impact on foster carers. The research was funded jointly by FosterTalk and the Sir Halley Stewart Trust.

More information: The Impact of Unproven Allegations on Foster Carers, [reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/ ... esCentreJuly2016.pdf](https://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/...esCentreJuly2016.pdf)

Provided by University of Oxford

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