

# Fact Sheet - Rules and Expectations in Foster Care

## Rules and Expectations in Foster Care: A CARE-Informed Approach

*Supporting children's safety, connection and growth through consistency and compassion*

### Why Rules and Expectations Matter

Children and young people in care often come from environments where expectations were unclear, inconsistent, or linked to fear. In a foster home, predictable rules and boundaries can provide a sense of **safety, structure, and belonging**, but only when paired with **relationship, understanding, and choice**.

### Good Practice Tips

- Co-create expectations with the child where possible. Use language that is strengths-based and collaborative (e.g. 'We agree to...' instead of 'You must...').
- Keep it simple and clear. Use 3–5 house expectations, with clear examples.
- Explain the 'why'. Help children understand the purpose behind rules – 'We walk inside so everyone feels safe.'
- Use visuals or charts for routines and expectations, especially for younger children or those with additional needs.
- Be consistent but flexible. Predictability helps, but context matters – consider what's behind the behaviour.
- Celebrate effort and growth. Acknowledge when children try, even if they don't always succeed.

### Reflection Questions for Carers

- Have I clearly explained the expectations in our home in a way the child understands?
- Do our rules reflect safety and respect, or control and compliance?
- How do I respond when rules are broken – do I support regulation and repair, or escalate the situation?
- What strengths is the child showing as they learn to meet expectations?
- Have I created space for the child to share what helps them feel safe and respected?

# Creating predictable routines

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## Creating Predictable Routines

Predictable routines help children feel safe, reduce anxiety and build confidence through knowing what comes next. For children with trauma histories, consistent routines also support regulation and trust.

### Steps to Create Predictable Routines:

1. Start with key times of day: Focus on morning, after school, mealtime and bedtime.
2. Use visual aids: Create a visual schedule with pictures or symbols. Include words if appropriate.
3. Co-create the routine: Involve the child where possible. Ask what helps them feel calm or ready.
4. Use consistent language: Repeat the same phrases for each part of the routine (e.g. 'Teeth, toilet, story, sleep').
5. Allow for flexibility: Keep the structure, but be responsive to the child's emotional state or unexpected changes.

### Example: After-School Routine

- Arrive home and unpack bag
- Have a snack and quiet time
- Homework or creative activity
- Free play
- Dinner prep/helping out

### Tips:

- Keep routines short and manageable
- Use encouragement and visual checklists
- Prepare for transitions with gentle warnings (e.g. 'In five minutes, it will be time to pack away.')

**Remember:** Predictability doesn't mean rigidity – it's about creating a rhythm that helps children feel safe, supported and ready to engage.

# Responding to behaviour with empathy and structure

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## Responding to Behaviour with Empathy and Structure

Children in care often express their needs through behaviour. Here's how to respond in a way that strengthens connection.

### Key Principles:

- See the need behind the behaviour. Ask yourself: What is the child trying to communicate?
- Stay calm and connected. Your emotional tone matters. A calm presence can regulate a child more than words alone.
- Use clear boundaries with compassion. Firm does not mean harsh. Boundaries help children feel secure.
- Repair after rupture. After a challenging moment, check in with the child to rebuild connection and help them understand what happened.

### Practical Strategies:

- Name the feeling and set the limit: 'I can see that you're really angry. It's okay to feel that way, but it's not okay to throw things.'
- Offer choices: 'Would you like to calm down on the couch or in your room?'
- Create a calm-down space: A safe, non-punitive area where the child can go to regulate.
- Reflect together after the moment: 'What helped you feel better? What might we try next time?'

**Remember:** Empathy without structure can feel unsafe. Structure without empathy can feel cold. Children need both to thrive.