

Cathy's Column

Holiday versus Annual leave... author Cathy Glass discusses the difference between the two

Now the main holiday season is over and we have all returned safely from great summer holidays or family days out, foster carers should start thinking about taking their own holiday entitlement – separate from their foster children. Two weeks seems to be the average holiday entitlement and it is written into our contracts, although neither we nor our support social workers (SSWs) always remember it is there. But we need to take our holiday (preferably outside the main holiday period of August) for reasons I shall come onto shortly.

What's in a name?

But first a moan: why do social workers and other professionals working in social care have 'annual leave' while foster carers take 'holidays' or ask for 'respite'? It may seem a trivial distinction but much can be inferred from a name or title, and 'annual leave' sounds far more professional than 'holiday' - 'she's on holiday'

– or 'respite', which sounds as though you aren't coping and

are in desperate need of a break before you have a breakdown. Given the initiatives that are being taken to give fostering the same professional status as social work then we need to standardize a few working terms, beginning with our holiday being written into our contracts as annual leave.

A break is a must-have

All workers, whatever their profession, take a break, simply because no one can work effectively without one. However, judging from readers' letters and foster carers I personally know, many carers often do work without a break, sometimes for years.

Typical is **Mrs N from the North of**

"No one can work effectively without a break"



Feeling old and tired? Don't wait years, now's time for a break

England: "The child we are fostering is special needs. My husband and I desperately need a break, but each

time I mention it to my SSW she tells me there isn't a carer available to look after our child. It's three years since our last break."

Or **Miss A from London**

who wrote: "I am a single carer and haven't had a break since I began

fostering four years ago. Each time I ask my link worker (SSW) if I can take a week off I am made to feel guilty for

leaving the child. I'm worn out. My own child stays with his grandparents and aunt sometimes but I can't do that with my foster child."

Approved carers only!

And here lies another reason why SSW's need to make sure their foster carers take annual leave: our own children can stay with relatives, friends, and neighbours. In fact, they can stay with anyone we choose to

help us out, but a foster child can only stay with approved carers who have been assessed and vetted by the social services and police checked.

Fostering is one of the most rewarding and fulfilling occupations but it is also one of the most demanding. Many children who come into care have a high level of needs, and they are with us twenty-four

hours a day, seven days a week. As foster carers we love what we do and we give it our all, but the burn out rate

"Fostering is rewarding, but also demanding"

is high. What a waste of a valuable resource if a foster carer resigns simply from lack of a break! SSW's should be proactive in ensuring their carers take annual leave, so they will return fresh and energised and able to do the work they love best... to the best of their ability.

Find more from Cathy here:

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