

Things to think about when applying to become a Special Guardian

Child's needs and history – what do you know?

Children may need to live with another family for many reasons and sometimes arrangements are made between family members with no involvement from Local Authorities.

Children who have been looked after by the Local Authority may have been placed in care due to risks posed by their family members or others or the inability of parents to care for their children through the situation they find themselves in. We know that many children who have experienced abuse and neglect can display more difficult behaviours growing up so they need carers who can help them feel safe and accept that the child may take longer to be able to manage their feelings.

You may know a lot about what has happened to the child or very little. Sometimes you will have heard the parents' side of the story and you may not yet have a full picture of what life has been like from the child's point of view. Becoming a Special Guardian can be challenging and rewarding as you will have to manage relationships both now and in the future for the child, parents, your family and yourself.

Relationship with child

Research has told us that if you already have a strong relationship with the child, this is very likely to lead to a positive outcome for everyone. Sometimes children can be placed with family and friends carers as 'Connected persons' and the child is fostered by you to test out the relationship before applying for a Special Guardianship Order.

Relationship with parents

You will need to think about the impact becoming a Special Guardian may have on your relationship with the child's parents and with other family members. As the Child's Special Guardian you will hold legal Parental Responsibility for them alongside that of the parents but for most decisions, 19 you will be able to override the parents' wishes unless it is for decisions about changing the child's name or their religion or having the child placed for adoption or adopted. You would also need their permission to remove the child from the country for over 3 months or these matters can be decided by the court.

It is likely that contact with parents will continue unless there are identified risks and whilst the contact can be beneficial for all parties, in some cases where children are badly affected by contact, there can be increased strain on you and your family.

Feelings

One of the hardest parts about becoming a Special Guardian is that it is likely that it isn't something you had planned on doing. Often it happens because of a crisis when emotions are running high. It is important that you have enough time to think about the commitment calmly and that you give yourself time to think about everyone's future needs – yours and the child's.

Impact on family life

Special Guardians have said that some of the more difficult issues they have had to deal with are: ?

- Lack of leisure time or ability to have a break
- Feeling tired ?
- Strain on family relationships ?
- Limited employment opportunities ?
- Increased strain on finance ?
- Lack of space

Of course there are also a lot of positives and Special Guardians also describe how they have enjoyed seeing the child flourish and grow and become integrated into their part of the family. They feel proud of the child and their progress.

Being assessed

If you decide to go ahead with an application to court to become a Special Guardian, a social worker will be allocated to visit you and prepare a report for the court. They will talk to you about your family circumstances, your relationships with the child and parents, your financial situation and work commitments and any health issues or criminal convictions, warnings or cautions you may have. This is all required in law. You need to give the Local Authority notice that you intend to apply to the Court for an SGO or you can ask for leave to apply from the court where there is already an adoption application being made.

They will also have to talk to you about your motivation for becoming a Special Guardian and your understanding of the child's needs and history alongside your ability to care for them and keep them safe and free from harm over the years to come.

Legal advice

It is always a good idea to seek independent legal advice as there may be other options you may want to consider that would suit your particular family situation better.

You can call the Family Right's Group advice line for further discussions on 0808 801 0366.

You may also wish to contact Grandparents 'Plus - a national charity for England and Wales that supports and campaigns on behalf of the 200,000 grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and other relatives who are raising children in Britain today because their parents cannot look after them. Grandparents Plus can be contacted on their advice line which is:-

0300 123 7015 or via email - advice@grandparentsplus.org.uk