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## **SUPPORTING AGE DISPUTED CHILDREN: ADVICE FOR FOSTER CARERS AND SUPPORTED ACCOMMODATION STAFF**

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Unaccompanied children arriving in the UK often do not have documentary evidence of their age or identity and their ages might not be accepted. The Refugee Council's Age Dispute Project has reported that 89% of the age-disputed young people they worked with in 2017/18 and 88% in 2018/19 who were deemed to be adults based on their appearance were subsequently accepted as children.<sup>1</sup>

Where a young person is age disputed a local authority may decide to carry out an age assessment which will determine whether they will be looked after as children or moved into adult asylum accommodation. For the young people that we work with the age assessment process is daunting, traumatic and results in their lives being put on hold for long periods of time whilst the assessment takes place or they seek to challenge the decision through court. Most find the process confusing and don't understand what is going on.

We have prepared this advice for foster carers and supported accommodation staff who are looking after these young people on a daily basis based on the information provided to us by the young people themselves.

### **1. Help us to understand what is happening**

Having your age questioned and disbelieved can be a very hard thing for a young person to understand. They may know that their age is being questioned but not understand what this means, what the process will look like and what the implications are if they are found to be an adult or a child.

Speak to the social worker to find out why this is happening and how they intend to carry out the age assessment so that you can help to explain to the young person what will take place and how.

There should be an Appropriate Adult present for each age assessment session. If the young person has someone supporting them or would like you to act as Appropriate Adult you should tell the social worker as it is important the young person has an adult there that they trust to act in their best interests.

### **2. Be there for us**

For many age disputed young people they will have very limited support networks with very few people, especially adults, to rely on for support. You will often be their main source of support aside from their social worker. Needs will vary but often young people struggle to cope with independent living for the first time and will need extra assistance, particularly where they may have limited language and communication skills. They may

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ADP-Policy-Brief\\_June-2019.pdf](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ADP-Policy-Brief_June-2019.pdf)



have additional health needs, including mental health needs which they may not have communicated to others.

### **3. Recognise how important your role is**

For young people who struggle with independent living or have very limited access to support your care and support will be extremely important to them. As part of the age assessment process the assessing social worker should try to obtain information from those who are in a position to interact with the young person on a regular basis and observe their interactions with others. Remember that your words will be used to make a decision with regards to age and are therefore very important. Help them to obtain supporting evidence of age, for example from college tutors or sports coaches, where appropriate.

### **4. Support us in accessing services and activities**

Newly arrived and with limited access to support and a language barrier it is difficult for unaccompanied young people to access extracurricular activities. These will be important for their health, well-being and integration into the UK as well as helping them to provide supporting evidence if their age is being disputed. Sometimes whilst their age is being disputed their lives are put on hold and they are told that they are not able to access education or activities as a child and will require additional help. If a young person is in supported accommodation or foster care and has been told they are not entitled to access education or the same support as other young people who are looked after, help them to seek advice and support to challenge this.

### **5. Support us to get help**

It is important that the young person is supported throughout the age assessment process. As the person who sees them most they may seek reassurance from you. Where an age assessment is being carried out it is important they understand what is going on and that they have an Appropriate Adult supporting them in each session. Where the outcome of the age assessment is that they are an adult the young person will have a limited window of opportunity to try to challenge the age assessment before being removed from care and into unsupported adult accommodation elsewhere in the UK. It is important that they are able to seek good legal advice quickly and they will require help to do this.

### **Who to contact**

If you are concerned about an age disputed young person in your care and wish to refer them for advice or help them to find a solicitor the following links may assist:

1. If you are in the North West contact GMIAU on 0161 740 7722 or [referrals@gmiau.org](mailto:referrals@gmiau.org)
2. If you are outside the North West of England find a local Public Law/Community Care solicitor using the Law Society "find a solicitor" page:  
020 7320 5650, <https://solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk>
3. Refugee Council Age Disputes Project  
[Age.Disputes@refugeecouncil.org.uk](mailto:Age.Disputes@refugeecouncil.org.uk) 020 7346 1134

