

Children and Young People's Views on Being in Care

A Literature Review

Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies

Coram Voice

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Foreword

We are extremely pleased to publish the literature review on 'Children and Young People's Views on being in Care', which seeks to highlight the voices of looked after children from existing research, on their journey through the care system. The review establishes both the positive and adverse experiences for children and young people of being in care and provides them with a platform to be heard without distortion.

This literature review supports the Bright Spots project, a research project between the University of Bristol and Coram Voice. The project aims to improve the care journey for all looked after children and highlight the 'bright spots' of practice within local authorities that contribute to the positive aspects of being in care. The intention is that local authorities will understand the causes of those bright spots so that they can adopt the very best standards of care.

We would like to thank the Hadley Trust for its generous funding and support for the development of the Bright Spots project to improve the life chances of children and young people in care. Thanks to the passion and commitment of our funder, we expect to be able to make a real difference to the lives of this vulnerable group.

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CHAPTER 1. CHILDREN'S VIEWS ON THEIR EXPERIENCES IN CARE

This chapter provides a summary of the key issues that emerged from a review of existing research on young people's views of their care experiences. Studies were only included if the young person's own views were presented by the authors. Ninety-seven studies were identified. Here, we will examine the main themes that were identified for all children. The following chapter will explore the views of looked after children who are likely to have additional needs, such as asylum and refugee seeking young people, younger children, and care leavers.

Four primary themes emerged from our review of the research literature – relationships, respect, rights and responsibility. Within each of these themes, there were a number of sub-themes, which will be considered. The quotes used in this chapter are from the young people interviewed or consulted in the various studies.

RELATIONSHIPS

Maintaining and developing positive relationships were at the heart of children and young people's concerns. The young people identified the over-riding importance of having trusting relationships with adults, friends, and family members and for these relationships to be loving, caring and affectionate (e.g. 11, 24, 49, 71, 80, 81, 88, 92). For example, a child in foster care said:

It was good to have a hug, and good for them to say, 'I love you, we're proud of you' ... It was good to be told that you were loved, cause obviously being in foster care, at times, it's quite lonely ... It was good to feel the love in different ways. (49)

While maintaining relationships was considered essential, many studies reported that young people thought that their relationships were not prioritised. Young people highlighted the lack of attention, paid by professionals and carers, to maintaining long-standing relationships with birth family members, previous carers, or social workers (9, 11, 12, 16, 29, 34, 35, 42, 46, 59, 88). One young person said:

After I left, it would have been nice to talk to people at (name of residential unit). You feel abandoned by them, like 'There you are – get on with it'. (34)

In one study (42), the views of sixteen 17-25 year olds were explored reflecting back on their experiences growing up in care. There were almost no examples of these young people having had a continuous positive relationship with an adult from early or mid-childhood. Studies also reported elements of relationships that were of particular importance for looked after young people.

HAVING RELATIONSHIPS WITH TRUSTED ADULTS

Having relationships with an adult or adults whom they could trust was important for many young people (11, 21, 35, 42, 46, 83, 88, 92). The young people described trusted adults as people who would be there when needed (34, 51, 88, 92). For example, a young person describing their social worker said:

She kept in touch ... and whenever I had trouble say, with studying, I knew I could pick up the phone and she'd be there for me. (51)

The following example shows how having a trusted and committed adult was particularly important for a young person who was going through a court hearing regarding their experience of sexual abuse:

I think really, since I started going to court I've understood him more ... I thought he was just like everyone else, come and go, mess up my life and that would be the end of it but he's not. He's like here now until I leave care. He's always been there for me, like when I was at court and that and he's always a shoulder to cry on, sort of thing (75)

However, the young people stated that frequent placement moves disrupted relationships (11, 16, 29, 35, 38, 41, 67, 70, 80). Some young people, who lacked positive relationships with adult figures, described using other means of getting attention. For example, one young person said:

That's why we used to play up, so that we could get some attention for us. I was a past master at getting attention – I used to throw tantrums. I felt like they (other children) were getting attention and why wasn't I? (34)

One young person talked about the difficulties that some looked after children faced in trying to establish trusting relationships and the need for better support so that young people were not excluded from the chance of a positive care experience:

They can talk and do all the things ... but until they adjust their system to fit the needs of the people that need them, we will never be perfect or right. It may suit some people because they might get on with someone they bond with or their foster family but what about those ones that can't bond with nobody. (3)

Some young people (37) thought that it was important to have support, encouragement and trusting relationships with more than one adult, as this increased the chance of someone being there when needed. It also meant that the young people could benefit from the specialist skills of different people, as described by the following young person:

Every problem I've had, they've helped me sort it out. There's more than one worker and you can go to somebody else if you need it. They're good at doing different things and they work together. There's someone there if you need it. And six heads are better than one. (37)

However, young people also emphasised the importance of having one named person responsible for their well-being, who involved them in decision-making and listened to their views (11). There is a danger that when many adults are involved no one takes overall responsibility. There was a consistent message from children and young people that it was important for them to have one key adult figure in their lives , but at the same time to have other positive adult relationships to provide for a variety of needs – both socially and supportive.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH BIRTH PARENTS

In many studies, the young people were reported as stating they wanted to be kept informed about their birth family and some young people wanted more contact (11, 12, 16, 29, 41, 54, 59, 85, 87, 88). In a survey of 2,000 looked after children (79), over a third (36%) wanted to see more of their birth family. The young people did not necessarily want to return to their birth families, but wanted to be kept informed about key events and the

well-being of relatives. One young person, reflecting on his worries for his father's health, said:

I have not seen (dad) for six Fridays and knowing that my dad has cancer and I worry a lot about my dad and always think that he is going to die. (88)

Missing their birth families sometimes led to running away or to seeing birth family members without the knowledge of their social worker (12, 88), as described by the following young person:

You should be allowed to go and see your family unless you are in danger. At the moment, my social worker is saying, "No", but I am still going behind her back and going to see them. (12)

Young people reported that a lack of regular contact with family members made maintaining relationships difficult (9). The following young person reflected how strange it could feel speaking to a birth parent after a long period without any contact:

It just felt weird, you know, your mum coming to see you and not knowing what to say to her after so long being without her. You just feel scared of talking to her, you know. You have to grow to know your mum again and grow to know your brothers and sister again. (9)

For some young people, however, too much contact was a problem. In one study (59), a young person described how she ran away from her placement in order to avoid contact with her birth parents. This young person wanted to be protected, yet felt that she had not been listened to with regard to her wishes about family contact.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIBLINGS

Sibling contact or keeping siblings together in the same placement was also important for children (16, 41, 42, 56, 70, 80, 87). The young people in one study (31) described feeling a sense of support from their siblings, as they were the only ones who could really understand what they were experiencing. The young people described how separation from siblings was

particularly devastating when those siblings had previously been responsible for caring for them, for example, when their parents were substance misusing.

There was a recognition by the young people that it was not always possible to keep siblings together. In these cases, they thought that more effort needed to be put into contact arrangements between siblings. One young person said that social workers should:

Try their hardest to keep them together but if they don't, make sure they don't drift apart and become more like distant relatives than brothers and sisters. (59)

Being placed separately from a sibling could also be a cause of running away, as explained by the following young person:

My sister was in a different placement to me. We ran away all the time to see each other. We should have been together (59)

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CARERS

Love, care and affection are important for all children. It was not surprising that looked after children identified these qualities as being important for them too. In addition, the young people emphasised the importance of feeling a sense of welcome and belonging wherever they were placed (56, 57, 60, 80, 82, 88, 92). There was a desire to be treated in the same way as other children where they lived and to have the same experiences (29, 38, 42, 57, 61, 62, 65, 78, 82, 92). The young people in one study (42) stated that small acts of kindness from carers such as being asked, when they got home from school, 'How was your day?' demonstrated that the carer was concerned and thinking about them. Shared leisure activities provided the opportunity to develop deeper and more trusting relationships with carers (34, 53).

One young person in a study of fostering (37) identified the importance of feeling as though the whole family had fostered her, and not just the foster carers. She said:

So it was the whole family that fostered you, it wasn't just mum and dad. It really has to work that way. (37)

The young people in several studies (15, 38, 51) valued foster carers who encouraged their educational progress. To make progress children and young people also needed a suitable place to do their homework, as a young person explained:

There needs to be the right environment, like I never had a desk where I could work or anything like that. (51)

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SOCIAL WORKERS

The looked after children in many studies said that they wanted positive long-term relationships with their social workers (1, 21, 24, 27, 35, 53, 56, 58, 70, 76, 92). In several studies, children stressed a desire for more contact with their social worker. Children wanted social workers to visit more often; turn up on time for meetings; and to return their calls (1, 27, 35, 55, 58, 68, 76). Rather than rushing, the young people wanted their social workers to take time to get to know them. Without this, the young people did not feel comfortable trusting their social workers with their personal and intimate thoughts and feelings (53, 83). Young people also recognised differences in the quality of social work support stating that some social workers were more willing to 'make things happen' and did more 'to fight their corner (42).

Staff changes were one of the main barriers in building long-term effective relationships with social workers (4, 35, 54, 56, 70). For example in one study (35), a young person reflected on the loss they felt when social workers moved on:

As soon as you were beginning to trust them (social workers), they moved on. Just as you were putting trust in them, if you did put trust in them, they were gone (35)

Young people suggested that more could be done to retain social workers by improving their working conditions (1). It was also thought that more could be done to support young people when there were staff changes, rather than the young people being informed haphazardly that they had a new social worker (1).

SUPPORT DURING TIMES OF TRANSITIONS

The young people in many of the studies emphasised the importance of having stability in their lives (11, 16, 29, 31, 35, 38, 41, 54, 67, 70, 83, 88). The young people in these studies spoke of the many difficulties that they faced during times of transition, whether this was leaving their birth family when they first came into care, a placement move, or transition to independence for care leavers. Lack of information increased children and young people's feelings of fear (31), especially at the point of leaving their birth family and entering care. Young people stated that they had not known where they were being taken or what was happening to them or to other family members. The following young person reflected on their experiences of coming into care:

I was thinking they were gonna take my momma somewhere and jus do whatever they gonna do with her, and jus leave me on the streets. (31).

Several young people described feeling scared and unsafe when moving to a new placement because they did not know where they were going and whom they would be living with. For example, one young person said:

... I hated been moved about not knowing where I was going next and who these people were. Sometimes it was quite scary and upsetting, as I could never settle down and was always playing up at school and at home. (88)

Young people wanted information in advance about where they were going and given an opportunity to meet the family first, or even a trial stay beforehand when moving to a new placement (1, 27, 38 57, 70). The young people also wanted to know when they were next going to see or speak to their birth family members (31). Another young person talked about the difficulties they had faced in becoming familiar with new household routines every time they moved placement:

You don't know who your person is going to be – looking after you; you don't know anything about them. You don't know what kind of food they'll have in that family. You don't know what time they'll eat. You don't know what's bedtime. What's the laundry system. (42)

Some of the young people (1) described feelings of worthlessness, as they were not even given suitcases in which to pack their possessions when moving placements. The young people wanted transitions to be handled with greater care. They wanted planned introductions to both new care and school environments (34, 38). Where introductions were planned and gradual, young people reported better experiences as in the following extract involving a move from a therapeutic residential unit to foster care:

The way they moved you on was really good. You started off coming (to the prospective foster home) for two hours, and then you spent a day. Next, I came for a weekend. Lee (key carer) stayed here as well. I came for a weekend on my own. I got to walk to school and back during a week here, to get used to it. I went back to The Planes (residential unit) for a week, and then I moved in. (34)

Transitions were particularly difficult if a young person also had to cope at the same time with a new social worker (48). Too many changes could result in feelings of isolation. A key transition identified by the young people was leaving care. This will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS

Having opportunities and support to make and keep friends was valued highly by many looked after young people (1, 24, 27, 29, 38, 40, 42, 46, 61, 62, 83). Placement instability, however, could make this problematic (42, 79, 80,), as one young person explained:

I am very angry because when I move I always leave my friends. (79)

RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS / SUPPORT WORKERS

The young people emphasised the importance of being able to talk openly to their teachers and support staff about personal issues and to be encouraged to do well in ways that were non-stigmatising (35, 42, 51). Young people described the support they had received in school:

I had two or three teachers who used to listen to me unconditionally. I used to chat to them at break times. I used to miss my break because I liked being with them. (34).

The support worker there was amazing - she used to do it without me realizing. (34)

SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION

The young people in several studies expressed a desire for more encouragement to achieve (3, 4, 37, 42, 45). Having an adult who continually encouraged and supported young people was associated with improving educational achievements and a greater likelihood of continuing in education after leaving care (3, 51). For example, one study (45) found that the young people who had been placed with foster carers who had a strong commitment to supporting education considered the commitment to be a key factor in their later educational success. The following young person described the impact of the support they had received from their foster carers:

*I knew I had the ability to do well and, because they believed in me, they gave me ... support me through college. I'm now in University ... training to be a social worker.
(3)*

It was shocking that almost half of the looked after young people surveyed in a Barnardo's study (2006) stated that they were never praised or rewarded, if they did well at school. Those that were praised said that praise came mainly from the foster carer, with very few saying they had been praised by a teacher. Almost all the young people said that more praise from teachers, social workers and foster carers would have encouraged them to try harder.

RESPECT

Many young people identified respect as a key component to having a positive care experience. For many looked after young people respect meant adults challenging negative stereotypes and taking their views seriously. One young person described how much they appreciated their foster carers treating them in this way:

Foster carers have treated us with respect and we love them. (80)

Respect was also evidenced by the way professionals spoke about birth parents (11). Despite family difficulties, it could still be very hurtful for young people to hear others talk negatively about their families:

I hate it when they slag off your mum or your dad. I mean, I can do that because they're my parents, but they don't really know them. (11)

NEGATIVE LABELLING AND STIGMA

Negative labelling and the stigmatisation of looked after young people concerned many of the young people (11, 12, 24, 38, 51, 53, 67). The young people stated that when people found out they were in care, they would face reactions of curiosity or sympathy, or assumptions that they were criminals or troublemakers. They disliked being treated as if they were a homogenous group. The following young people described some of the stereotypes that they experienced:

You say you are in care and lots of people feel sorry for you. I hate that feeling. (12)

All people have certain views on people in care. They think we were troublemakers (24)

The young people emphasised the need to challenge the stigma associated with being in care, through openness, education and discussion. The following young person said:

I think the best way to deal with stigma is to actually talk about it and maybe produce children's literature to help other children understand it better. (51)

The young people in several studies felt that there was a lack of awareness amongst professionals and peers of the issues that looked after young people face (1, 27, 38, 51). One young person thought that more could be done to raise awareness of the issues faced by looked after children:

There should be drama groups going round schools to share the message of why people are in care. (1)

Looked after children wanted a greater emphasis on their strengths and achievements (24, 37, 87). Emphasising positive attributes was one way of challenging the negative labelling and stigma experienced by children who are looked after.

EDUCATION AND STIGMA

Young people in a number of studies discussed the issue of negative labelling within schools (4, 38, 97). Looked after children thought that teachers and peers mistakenly assumed that children were placed in care due to their own poor behaviour, or they failed to appreciate the difficulties faced by children before entering care and the effects of this on their behaviour (38). Thus, children were labelled or blamed for their own behaviour. The young people also thought that there should be more efforts to improve school attendance to avoid looked after children being seen as different from other children (51). Low expectations were also of concern. In several studies (2, 51, 82) young people felt that teachers did not push them hard enough, or had preconceived ideas about what they could achieve because of their care history. Young people thought that their potential went unrecognised and their self-confidence was undermined. The following young person gave their thoughts on the effects of stigma on looked after children's educational prospects:

I think there is a sort of mind set, which says because you are in care you are not actually going to achieve or do very much. (51)

Those young people that did well academically could identify a consistent and supportive individual in their lives (51). Young people wanted teachers to be aware of their needs without drawing unnecessary attention to them. This was as stated by the following young person:

Teachers need to watch out for young people in care in a way that encourages them, not makes them stand out. (11)

There were two areas in particular where looked after young people thought teachers needed more awareness. First – the young people found that receiving permission to go on trips always took much longer for them than it did for their peers, as they had to get permission from social workers. Second, the young people did not like attention being

drawn to them when they were being called out of class for meetings with social workers (42).

OPPORTUNITIES AND UNDERSTANDING

The young people reported that having encouragement, opportunities and resources to have hobbies and do fun and exciting things was important, as it made them feel like they had the same chances as other children (51, 57). It gave their lives a sense of normality. One young person reflecting on not wanting to 'stand out' said:

With my drama, music, sport, I needed to have the encouragement and resources. So if someone was in that position, I would make sure they had the resources and didn't feel out of it in terms of their clothing and their mixing with friends. (51)

Feeling that no one understood them increased the young people's sense that they were different, which made them feel isolated, especially in school (12, 34, 38, 42, 51), as in this extract:

I found school really difficult because, of course, people at school didn't exactly understand...I found it difficult to settle, feeling different. (34)

Some of the young people experienced so many distractions in their home life such as placement moves and complex relationships with their birth family that they found it difficult to concentrate in school. Complex and disrupted lives also caused periods of low attendance for some looked after children (42). The young people felt that there was little recognition within schools of the complexities they faced in their lives and the extra resources and input they might need. Some young people suggested that teachers needed additional training to know how to support looked after children:

It's not fair on teachers either to have to deal with these care kids and not know what they're dealing (with). (42)

Lack of understanding was also raised as a concern in relation to foster carers and social workers. Young people thought that greater awareness of the effects of early maltreatment

(27) was needed by all professionals. Some young people suggested that it would be helpful if those trying to support them had experiences of being in care themselves (1, 88).

RESPECT AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Children and young people wanted greater efforts to promote their sense of identity beyond that of being a looked after child (11, 53). One young person voiced his frustration by saying:

I would have liked them to sit down with me and have a conversation for more than 15 minutes. Instead of telling me what they were going to do with my life, find out a bit about me. (11)

Similarly, young people wanted to feel valued by their social workers and respected as individuals (53) and not just seen as 'coming with the job':

The social workers never used to treat you like you were a friend. You were just someone who came with the job. (53)

Another young person in the same study described how having a social worker who spent time with him opened up conversations. He said:

...if you're treat like an equal, then you want to share things. (53)

Many studies (1, 11, 27, 53, 55, 56, 66, 67,80, 87) reported looked after children's desire to be listened to and heard. Young people also wanted to be believed, especially when disclosing incidents of abuse (35). The following quote is typical of children and young people's views:

Social services should also try to listen to them more, and actually listen, not just pretend to. (1)

Young people wanted advocates to be more widely available (1, 5, 11, 12, 67, 87, 92) and the work of children's rights officers and advocates was often appreciated as in this example:

'Rights of children's' attitude are brilliant cos they're actually always polite, always willing to listen to you and always understand you (5)

Young people in many studies (1, 4, 7, 12, 34, 38, 42, 57, 60, 61, 64, 70, 88) reported bullying and peer violence as a problem for looked after young people. Over half of the 67 young people surveyed in one study (4) reported that they had been bullied at school and believed that this was a consequence of being in care. Moreover, other forms of bullying may be occurring such as cyber-bullying but this has yet to be explored with young people in care.

Looked after young people have also described experiencing violence in their intimate partner relationships (24, 95) and have linked this to their complex experiences of growing up in care. For example, one young person said:

With my mum and dad they used to hit me and because they loved me I used to count it, as that's the reason why they were hitting me...and he (ex-boyfriend) knew that my mum and dad had been violent to me in the past and that I'd let them (boyfriends) get away with it (violence). (95)

RESPECTING CONFIDENTIALITY

In a number of studies (24, 58, 74, 83), the young people stressed that they wanted to be told when information about them was being passed onto others and where possible to be asked first. The consequences for the young people where this did not occur could be highly damaging, both for their relationships with their birth families and with building future trusting relationships with professionals, as in the following example:

*I said something to my social worker once ... and then a couple of months later you get like review report things don't you, and it f***** had all of it in it, didn't it. And I was like, "Mum, it's bullshit, it's bullshit, I never said nothing like that, she's got it all wrong." Know what I mean – trying to lie. And then I called my social worker and said, "What do you think you're playing at? It was like confidential, talking to you confidentially and you go away, you f***** put it on paper." (83)*

The young people generally appreciated being told which things would need to be written down and which would be kept confidential. The following young person said that they would not have disclosed so much had they known it would be available for others to read:

I felt really let down because I thought I had been talking to her privately but I saw she had written it all down in the file for anyone to read. I wouldn't have said anything to her if I had known she was going to do that. (74)

It was recognised that social workers often had to pass on information to others. Therefore, it was important to them to have adults in their lives whom they could talk to without having this worry. For example, a young person said:

Some things I tell a social worker and they ALL know about it. But if I tell (advocate) and she doesn't think I was in danger, she'd keep it to herself (5)

The young people also stressed how they wanted discussions to take place where other staff or children would not be able to hear in order to reduce their experiences of negative labelling and stigmatisation (56, 70, 83).

RIGHTS

Many looked after young people have expressed a desire for a right to information, more choice, and participation in decisions about their care journey. Issues of particular concern were around their health and placements.

INFORMATION

The looked after young people in several studies (11, 42, 56, 59), wanted more information on their rights and entitlements especially during times of change. They also wanted to know the care standards and inspection results for the place where they were living (56).

Most young people (42) wanted information to help them understand why they were in care, although some had had to fight to access their files. Some young people thought that information had been kept from them because of adults' perceptions that it would upset them (59). Even when they had access to case files, young people reported large gaps in information about their past. Young people regretted how little personal information was

stored such as photos and family mementos. However, young people spoke more positively about life-story work (11, 34, 37).

The young people emphasised the importance of information and explanation for children who had experienced sexual abuse. The young people often felt isolated, confused, and had low self-esteem. They were also often going through processes that were confusing. Young people wanted information to be repeated for as long as it took for the child to feel clear about what was happening (75).

INFORMATION ABOUT HEALTH

Studies show that looked after young people believe that they receive less information and advice than other young people on issues relating to: relationships; healthy lifestyles; sexual health; substance misuse, entitlements such as free prescriptions; and how to register with a doctor or dentist (13, 14 ,47). Looked after young people wanted information that they could understand from a respected source (13). Having a trusted adult such as a foster carer or social worker enabled the young people to talk about intimate health concerns. One study (30) found that young people valued the role of social workers in helping to discuss private health matters such as sex and contraception. Issues around health care are explored in more detail later on in this chapter.

However, professionals did not always explain the details of medical assessments, and therefore young people did not always understand their purpose (23, 50). Having good quality medical care and reviews of medication were important to young people, as was having staff and carers who were knowledgeable about medical conditions (83) and being encouraged to raise their own health concerns during medical examinations (13). Placement moves caused a loss of connection with particular health services such as GP's, dentists etc. Placement moves could also cause disruption to education and young people might have missed particular lessons around for example sex education or PSHE topics (13).

Choice and health

In relation to health services, young people wanted choice, control and involvement in decision-making both within therapeutic relationships and in the process of accessing services (83). Young people wanted to be able to access therapeutic help informally through settings such as schools, advice centres and youth services, where they could initiate contact with health services without the intervention of carers. Young people identified a lack of therapeutic support and wanted counselling to be more readily available for looked after children (24, 26, 27, 42, 83). Counselling was particularly needed for young people who had suffered a family bereavement, sometimes because of a family member who had committed suicide (42).

However, some young people had mixed feelings about the benefits of therapeutic interventions. Some young people had found counselling useful while other young people did not want to engage and be reminded of past events (34). Young people recognised the impact of frequent placement moves on their mental health, especially the loss of emotional stability and contact with trusted adult figures. The following young person described the impact on moving on their self-esteem:

Every time you move, you feel rejected and this affects your self-esteem and confidence (4)

Placement choice

In several studies (1, 27, 56, 59, 67, 80) young people were reported as wanting a choice in any new placement and to be involved in pre-placement decisions. Young people wanted to live in good quality and spacious accommodation that was clean and homely (1, 24, 56, 58). A 17 year old said:

I live in a building, which is very old, and the furniture is old as well and has been used by different people. (24)

Having privacy, in particular having their own bedroom was also important for young people (24, 38, 56, 57, 63). Studies also identified how young people wanted their views on reunification to be heard (28, 58).

In a study (33) that considered how the views of young people could be included in the commissioning process, it was suggested that young people be included in the recruitment and training of new foster carers.

DECISION-MAKING

A consistent finding across studies was young people's wish to be more involved in decision-making (11, 21, 27, 35, 38, 42, 46, 59, 66,67, 79, 80, 87, 88). Young people wanted to be kept informed between review meetings and to have decisions explained to them. They wanted to be made aware of what their care plan contained and to be involved as described by the following young people:

I've been in care for a long time and I never get a say in what I would like. It's always what other people would like and I'm fed up with it. (79)

Talk to me before you make decisions for me. (80)

A survey of looked after children (69) found that between one quarter and one third of those who replied did not know that they had a care plan. Many could not say what a care plan was or what it contained. Of those who knew the content, only 69% agreed with the plan. Young people in residential care were much less likely to agree with the whole of their care plan than were other children.

Feeling as though they were involved in decision-making was both dependent on and part of creating a good relationship with professionals, as the following young person reflected:

My social worker was really good. She made sure I was involved in everything. (3)

Another young person (35) stressed how being involved in the decision-making process was a way of showing care and of building a positive relationship:

If they'd (the children's home staff) sat down and talked to me, asked me how I wanted to deal with it, it would have shown...I don't know, it would have shown caring, I suppose. (35)

Family group conferences (8) are not a suitable option for every family, but where used, children report feeling consulted. Even very young children (6 years old) were able to understand the information given to them during the meeting. A child who had attended a FGC said:

I've had social workers just making decisions for me, you know, without even consulting me. So that (the FGC) was really brilliant, because you get to decide yourself. (8)

For young people who had experienced sexual abuse - being involved in decision-making was identified to be particularly important, as it helped them feel they had regained some power, after their particularly powerless experience (75).

MAKING COMPLAINTS

One study (5) showed how young people found it hard to make complaints due to issues around confidentiality and fear of the consequences. For example, a child's complaint about a residential worker led to them becoming known as a 'grasser' by other staff members who had become aware of the complaint. Other young people feared having to continue living in the same foster placement after making a complaint or of being removed and placed into a worse situation, as in the following example:

Personally, if I was in foster care again I'd never make a complaint about a foster carer – about what they've done to you – and I'd say that to anybody in care. And I do know quite a few people in care say 'Don't make a complaint because it's not worth it'. (5)

RESPONSIBILITY

A number of studies (11, 37, 42) have identified the importance looked after children attach to being given opportunities to be or to become responsible. Key elements of this will be explored below.

MUTUAL TRUST

The young people in one study (37) identified the importance of mutual trust – that it was not only important to have adults that they could trust, but to have adults who also trusted them. This made them feel as though they were worthwhile people and built up their self-esteem:

I think that most folk need is trust. If you can see that somebody trusts you, it makes you feel happier. It makes you feel as though you want to get it right in your life. It makes you want to get your life sorted and basically get on with it. (37)

BEING GIVEN SECOND CHANCES

Being given a second chance (11, 37, 42) and the opportunity to learn from mistakes was seen as part of growing up and becoming responsible. The young people identified how second chances made them feel that they were being treated fairly and in the same way as other children. They also thought a second chance confirmed that they were worthy of being given a chance to be a good and responsible person. Coming from families with few boundaries and having to learn about rules inevitably led to mistakes. Similarly, care leavers who were learning to live on their own and setting their own rules and boundaries also made errors of judgment. Young people benefitted when they were encouraged to learn from their mistakes by putting them right and some looked after children were likely to need more than a second chance, but a third and a fourth (11, 37). However, young people reported that they were often not given a second chance or an opportunity to put things right and this made them feel that carers or social workers were not committed to them (42), as this young person complained:

Things tend to go well for a few weeks, then I mess up. Professionals can tend to overreact – I mean it's just a problem! (11)

GAINING LIFE SKILLS

Many young people said that it was important that they were given opportunities to learn skills that would help them become independent and responsible when they left care (1, 3, 12, 24, 42, 72). However, young people who had left care thought they had not been given the necessary skills such as cooking, cleaning, being able to drive, completing forms, and personal hygiene. One young person commented:

Basically, I would have liked in the personal development plans, I would have liked them to lay out, 'Where do you want to go in the future? ...What are your aspirations? Where would you like to go? How can we help you develop as a person? Because if you're developed as a person then you can live on your own more successfully generally. I would have liked them to ask me ... But I didn't get none of that. (3)

The young people also identified a need for continual support to cope with some of the more complex challenges associated with leaving care such as financial management and planning for their future in terms of education and employment. These issues will be explored further in the section on care leavers in the next chapter.

HAVING A PLACE IN THE WORLD

Being given opportunities to participate in community activities was recognised by young people as an important way of developing social skills, confidence and self-esteem (36, 37). Some care leavers stated that helping others was an important step in recognising what they had been through, how far they had come, and the help they had received on the way:

I do think I've done well myself. I didn't used to but now I do. Being a mentor means I'm helping other people and that's a good feeling – very good. (37)

I like to do something to help everyone else after all the help I've been given. (37)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored literature giving young people's views on the core issues affecting them as looked after children. It was evident from undertaking the literature review that young people have strong and clear ideas about the things that need to happen to improve the care experiences of looked after children.

Whilst this chapter has focussed on issues of relevance for all looked after children, the following chapter explores more specific issues faced by some looked after children such as refugee and asylum seeking young people, teenage parents and younger looked after children.

CHAPTER 2. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

This chapter explores the literature on the views of looked after children who may have specific issues associated with their particular experiences, for example, being an asylum seeker, having a disability, or being a care leaver. As in the previous chapter, we have focussed on studies that included the views of young people themselves.

REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKING YOUNG PEOPLE

Refugee and asylum seeking young people are just as likely as other looked after children to experience the issues already raised in the previous chapter. However, they may face some more specific or additional issues, as they are likely to have been separated from family members and experienced trauma.

Studies (11, 18, 52, 90) have reported that friendships were particularly important to refugee and asylum seeking young people because of their separation from their birth family. Those with siblings described the importance of staying together (90). One young person stated:

Friends are important to me. I do not have family in this country and I cannot see my family back home. (11)

The young people said that their placement and educational settings were the main places where they established friendships (90). Those who were not in consistent education or who were living independently described feeling isolated. Lack of money also prevented young people taking part in leisure activities with other young people (17, 90). Some of the young people said that churches and mosques were important places to establish their community and social networks (18). The young people said that building longer-term relationships with adults whom they could trust encouraged discussion of their family situation (90).

The refugee and asylum seeking young people described how maintaining contact with family members was often difficult. One study (90) found that some of the young people feared that they would be returned home if they asked for help to find or get in touch with

relatives from their country of origin. Other young people actively wanted to locate and get in touch with their relatives, yet found that support was lacking. One young person said:

I said to my support worker, "what has happened about my Red Cross?" I have not been contacted. It has been approximately two years now" ... She says, "Haven't the Red Cross called you? " I really don't know what is happening ... Has it actually been done? Has my information been sent off? (90)

Some of the young people (18) said that their mobile phones were confiscated on arrival in the UK and not returned until months later, even when they were no longer required as evidence. Lacking a mobile phone limited their ability to contact family and friends whose numbers they held only on their phones.

Young people found it difficult to bond with social workers if their social worker was involved in their age assessment (18, 52).¹ The involvement could lead to acrimonious relationships, as one young person explained:

It was hard. It was hard because she was against me, she was really against me. I liked her but I felt she didn't like me. After that she told me I had to have another worker, as she couldn't work with me any more...things like that. (18)

The young people reported frequent encounters of racism. One young person said:

If people know you are an asylum seeker in this country or a refugee, immediately it is like discrimination. They are racist towards you. (90)

The young people (52) described feeling conspicuous because of their minority status in small, largely 'white' towns around Kent, where the majority of young people had entered the UK. Incidents of racial harassment from local people were common and the young people (3) said that uncertainties about their legal status and prospects made them feel unsettled and vulnerable to the negative effects of stereotyping and racism. This led some of the young people to move to cities where they had less support. The young people said that they were

¹ Social workers can be asked to provide information to United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA) to assist in UKBA's selection of suitable candidates to return to their country of origin

not being taught the skills of how to deal with racism and the possible hostility that might be faced as a young immigrant.

The refugee and asylum seeking young people (11) described having limited information and little support in understanding their rights and entitlements. They also reported a lack of fairness in relation to their treatment in comparison to other looked after children. The young people felt that they were particularly poorly supported in relation to accommodation, being kept informed, and their emotional health compared to other looked after children. These views will be explored below.

ACCOMMODATION

The refugee and asylum seeking young people stated (52, 90) that they had limited choice of accommodation and whom they lived with. Some young people described difficulties, as they had been placed with white families within predominantly white areas, who did not speak their language. One young person said how their accommodation made them feel very lonely:

I (did) not speak any English and we have different cultural backgrounds ... I did feel a bit lonely and afraid of doing something wrong. (90)

Some of the young people (17, 90) said that their limited accommodation choices accelerated the move to semi-independent settings, which were not always well supported. Asylum seekers who were aged 16/17 on arrival in the UK described being considered as an adult and therefore able to live independently although not yet ready to do so (90). Young people who were placed in independent settings found it harder to continue with their education (90). Unaccompanied asylum seekers were often ambitious and aspirational in terms of education and employment, and some were already well-educated (52). The young people suggested they might be provided with an 'education advocate' to assist them in negotiating access to educational and training provision and some wanted more formal English teaching than they were currently receiving (52).

LACK OF INFORMATION AND DELAYS

Young people described a lack of basic information on how to access health and transport services. One young person said:

No one tells you all the things you need to know, to explain things to you, like where to find a doctor, transport, how things work. (11)

Another young person described having to wait a day and a half before he was transferred to the assessment centre and reported that he was not given any information about why he was waiting (52). A number of young people complained about waiting for excessive periods of time for a decision on their asylum claims. This was particularly the case for children deemed to be 'third country' cases. These were young people who had applied for asylum in another country, prior to their entry to the UK. Some of the young people were very concerned and anxious about their legal situation. One young person, had waited 20 months and still had "no paperwork of any kind" (52). Some of the young people complained that the system for assessing age was unfair, and that the assessments undertaken by the social workers happened too quickly. Young people(17) described a lack of access to good quality legal support services, which were obviously highly necessary given the central importance of their claims.

MENTAL HEALTH

About a third of the refugee and asylum seeking young people in one study had concerns about their mental health (90). The young people stated that anxieties about the past affected their ability to resettle. They also reported how a lack of information about their rights and entitlements to education, housing and leaving care services and the status of their asylum claims made them highly anxious about their current situation and their future (18, 52, 90). For example, one young person described the impact that such stresses had on his emotional health:

When I received the decision of the Home Office and they refused my application for asylum, I was almost mental and I was admitted to the hospital. I am on tablets to help me cool down. I stopped going to college for four months. (90)

Young people said that counselling and therapy were rarely offered when they arrived in the UK (17). Even when offered, the young people described finding it hard to be open and talk freely about their anxieties or were concerned about the associated stigma of expressing concerns about their mental health (18). Whilst many of the young people were keen to enter education, stress or a trauma made it difficult to continue their studies. Young people needed considerable support and encouragement at this time.

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

Young people in care who have disabilities experience the same preoccupations and concerns as other young people in care (20). However, for some young people with a disability there may be additional areas of importance and this may vary by their type of disability and the accommodation in which they live. However, in this review few studies were found that directly asked looked after children with a disability for their views.

A study (72) undertaken 17 years ago explored the experiences of young people with a disability living away from their families. The young people living in residential schools, described how they missed their parents and siblings, yet it was sometimes difficult for their parents to visit regularly because of the large distances from their homes to the residential unit. Having friends was very important to the young people, however when they left their residential schools they often lost touch with the friends made in school (72). Boredom was a prominent issue for many young disabled people, exacerbated by a lack of contact with friends (20). Maintaining friendships in adolescence became more difficult as social activities became less organised and more casual (20).

Being able to communicate with others was paramount for the young people with a disability. The young people described how continuation of the same carer was very important because often those carers had learnt how to communicate and could understand them when others could not. Carers were then able to help young people be a part of the everyday decision-making (72).

Looked after young people with a disability (72) described a lack of consultation when decisions were being made about them. There was often a sense that decisions were being made to suit other people rather than themselves. The following young person described

how their disability was used as a reason to justify moving them, rather than carers having to adapt:

I always felt that I was being shunted around to suit other people, because I didn't fit in with them –When they said I got too heavy to lift it was me that had to move, not them that had to change the way they did things. (72)

Young people described how being supported with communication was key to their sense of feeling that they had rights, were respected, and had control over their daily lives. Disabled young people (31) who were involved in participation activities or in decision-making around their care were the most articulate and confident young people. Those young people with more complex communication requirements were often excluded although it was possible for those with the most severe communication difficulties to make it known what made them happy or unhappy. Those working with disabled young people did not always give young people opportunities to communicate and a number of young people were using communication systems that did not really suit them (72).

In one study (72) a number of the disabled young people described experiences of abuse but few had sought support. Young people worried that due to communication issues they would not be able to explain the incident properly or defend themselves and would not be believed. Bullying was also a problem in school and in the community (20).

Some of the disabled people felt that they were not learning enough about skills for independent living or preparation for employment (20). Expectations were low, as one young person explained:

And you know independent living skills at school was about making yourself a cup of tea! (72)

YOUNG PARENTS

This section reports the views of young parents who were looked after or had left care. There is limited research (3, 17, 89, 96) on their views, although their children are at greater risk of becoming looked after in comparison with other young parents.

Young mothers described how having a baby was a way to bring stability and love into their lives. Love and stability that they thought had been sadly lacking whilst they were in care. In the next extract a young mother who had recently left care described her reasons for having a baby:

Now I thought, I am on my own. How can I make sure I am never alone again? I am going to have a baby, then I will never be on my own again ... this baby is going to comfort me, and I will never be on my own. (17)

Becoming a parent was often described as being very positive, giving young women status and a sense of maturity (17). For some however, although having a baby was positive, other factors, such as their intimate partner relationships could be problematic. The previous chapter identified how some young people were vulnerable to partner violence because of their previous experiences of maltreatment. Prior experiences sometimes left young people believing that abuse was a normal part of a loving relationship (96) and a lack of family support could leave mothers isolated and financially dependent on abusive partners. One young mother stated:

There's no support to do it on your own, I clung to him, 'cos I had no other support. If like benefits they muck you up, one time it took 3 months to get a penny from anybody. Where was I to get money, food? I clung to him. (96)

One study (89) considered the views of 16 young fathers, in or leaving care. The young fathers described how due to their complex and unsettled backgrounds they found it hard to trust others and how this affected their relationships with their partners, children and service providers. Their lack of trust in services was exacerbated by a fear of being negatively stereotyped as young fathers, which deterred them from accessing support.

I find it hard to trust anyone so don't really trust doctors ... I've got to be really ill before I seek help (89)

Those who did describe positive experiences of services tended to attribute this to a key individual who had been supporting them over a long period. Many young fathers (89) said that they lacked confidence in their ability to provide for their child due to their limited

education and employment prospects. Some fathers however, appreciated being given support to learn how to care for their child as described by the following young man:

I'm going to (a local agency) and I'm practicing my fathering skills. So the time I ain't got with my daughter I'm using to prepare myself ... so when I do see her again I can cook her the foods she needs. I'm a terrible cook...they've offered to give me cooking lessons. (89)

Unfortunately, it seemed that such support was rarely offered and young fathers were a group who received little help. They also felt that their status as fathers was ignored in care leaver support arrangements and not considered in relation to accommodation.

Many young parents (17) stated that they found it hard to go to social services for support because of fears that such a request would be perceived as not being able to cope and subsequently increase the risk of their child being removed from their care. One mother explained:

The more you ask social services for care and support, the more they are querying your parenting skills. (17)

These fears around accessing help left them unsupported in the face of their additional responsibilities and may have left some unable to receive support to learn parenting skills. The young mothers wanted social workers to be more sensitive and understanding of their previous care experiences and the impact on their relationships and parenting skills. They wanted social workers to be more supportive and non-threatening in their approach, as in this example:

I'd run out of nappies ... I phoned her (after-care worker) and asked if I could have some money to get some ... but she read me the Child Protection Act basically, because I didn't have what I needed for the baby. (3)

Young fathers also felt that social workers and doctors were unhelpful and uninterested in them because they stereotyped them as useless and unable to achieve:

They (doctors) think 'another no hoper'. I think that's why a lot of people get rid of their kids, as they can't be bothered with the hassle ... You get treated like shit by the doctors. (89)

YOUNGER CHILDREN

Research that takes into account the views of very young looked after children is sparse reflecting one of our main findings – the presumption that younger children do not have a valid view, or if they do, that they will not be able to articulate it. The research that has been conducted with younger children, however, presents a different picture, which will be explored in this section.

One study (69) found that younger children said that their family was the most important thing in their lives and speaking on the telephone was the most important way of keeping in touch. Whereas older young people may have more personal control around contact with family and friends through mobile phones and social networking, for younger children efforts to ensure phone contact may be more important.

The young children in several studies (55, 94) felt that they were not listened to because of their age. They said that one of the best ways to listen to younger children was to spend time with them, and to give them opportunities to talk. One child reflected on how a fear of younger children saying things that were 'bad' or 'upsetting' seemed to be reason that she had not been asked for her views.

Interviewer: Do you think that people (at home) listen to you about your wishes or anything?

Crystal: Nah

Interviewer: Why?

Crystal: Cos there's too much arguing an all for people to hear us

Interviewer: Ah ... so what you think is that you don't really get much of a say about what happens but you think you should get more of a say about what happens

Crystal: Yeah I do

Interviewer: And why don't you think that people listen to children

Crystal: Cos they don't wanna hear what they're saying. They (the children) might say the bad words

Another young person (48) thought that his social worker had not listened to him because he was five years old, although he had tried to express his unhappiness with his foster placement. When he felt that he had not been listened to, he started running away and misbehaving. He became labelled as badly behaved and disturbed – a label which he began to accept and found hard to change.

The younger children also felt that they were less likely than older children to have a say in things such as placement choices. A Care Monitor Report (71) involving a survey of 2,305 children and young people between the ages of 4 and 24, found that the children under 14 were much more likely to say that they did not get a choice in their most recent placement compared to the children over 14 years of age. The report (71) also found that children under 14 years old were much less likely to know who their Independent Reviewing Officer was than children over 14. They were also less likely to know what an advocate was and how to get hold of one.

Younger children also felt that information about their past and events in their lives was commonly withheld. Rather than protecting them, lack of information caused confusion and self-blame. The following child (94) blamed themselves for their entry into care, as they were given no information to believe otherwise:

Interviewer: Do you know why you don't live with your mummy, daddy, Andrew, Ann-Marie and Angela?

Child: Yep

Interviewer: And why is that?

Child: Cos I was cheeky to them (94)

Children aged between four and seven in a study (94) said that they experienced loss and confusion when entering care and would have liked things to have been explained to them

more clearly. For example, one child seemed to know little about why she had been removed from her family home:

Interviewer: And did you understand why you couldn't live at home anymore?

Child: No

Interviewer: Did no one sit down and tell you?

Child: No

Interviewer: Do you think they should have done?...

Child: Yeah

Interviewer: Goodness me

Child: So that was not fair (said emphatically) (94)

The younger looked after children talked of the importance of fair discipline. They stated that the use of rewards was most helpful, as well as having things explained to them when they had done something wrong (67). Children under 14 years old were more likely to have experienced bullying, in particular, face to face bullying whereas the older age group were more likely to have experienced cyber bullying (70). The under 14's were also more likely to use adults as a key form of support when being bullied.

Young children had a strong sense that they had not been treated fairly, they wanted more information and like all children to have their views listened to and taken seriously.

YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MINORITY ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS

Several studies (1, 3, 35, 76) reported that young people thought that their views on the ethnicity or the religion of the family with whom they were going to be placed were not taken into consideration. One young person said:

You know, I told social services, 'I don't like God people' and they sent me to live with a pastor and his wife!, I mean what were they thinking? So I just ended up running away again. (35)

Taking ethnicity into account in placement choices, did not necessarily mean that a black child wanted to be placed with a black family, as the following black young person explained:

I was raised around white family life when I was in care. I wanted a white family, they were having none of it. They said I had to go to a black family. (1)

Young people also criticised tokenistic efforts to meet young people's ethnicity and cultural needs. One young person said:

I mean all right you might put a picture of a black person up on the wall but that isn't giving you your roots. (3)

The young people wanted professionals and carers to talk to them and make efforts to understand their needs regarding their culture and ethnicity, rather than jumping to stereotypes and assumptions. In one study (24) the young people thought it would be useful to have role models from similar ethnic backgrounds to themselves. Some of the young people (3) reported that they were not always given the appropriate cultural and racial support during placements, or the support to be able to deal with racism once they had left care and were living on their own.

The young people from minority ethnic backgrounds said that they wanted more respect for their culture and ethnicity and greater efforts by professionals to communicate with young people from different backgrounds (1, 58). Nineteen percent of the young people in a survey of 2,000 looked after children reported receiving racist treatment from other young people at their placement (79). Racism was also an issue for care leavers when they entered employment (3). The following care leaver described the racism they experienced at work:

*They just called me a n*****, stuff like that really. It was really horrible how someone can be so cruel. I'm glad that I did make up stories to go home because if I did stay any longer I know that I would have punched them. And that's what I didn't want to do at the time cos I had enough of that when I was at school. (3)*

CARE LEAVERS

Young people in several studies (3, 24, 39) stressed how they felt worried about leaving care. The following young person reflected how he had felt unprepared for the process of leaving care:

Very little planning for the future and I was worried as I didn't know where I would go when I turned 18. I ended up signing up for an HNC at college on a course I didn't really want to do, as there seemed to be more help offered if you were going onto further education. When I went onto the HND I ended up dropping out, as I didn't have secure accommodation ... I found it difficult not having a social worker and felt very much on my own and didn't really have access to anyone to ask for help or advice and found the transition very difficult. (24)

Support for care leavers was variable. One young person described the positive impact of having a key adult in his life to help him at this time of transition, and the importance of long-term support:

I got quite a lot of practical help, you know, like they helped with my rent and everything. Now I've got a support worker and she helps me more with emotional support and I know if I picked up the phone and said I really need to speak to someone, she'd be there. I think it's just amazing that five years down the line there's somebody still there for me. (37)

Care leavers said that having key supportive figures in their lives was not about becoming dependent on those people, but about having someone to help them to learn how to be able to do things for themselves. The following young person described how their social worker supported them to learn the skills for independent living:

The social worker I have now is good. She helps me help myself, helps me learn to do things myself. (11)

Young people also expressed anxiety and fear of living on their own, as in this example:

I'm so used to having been with my family or friends. So it was quite difficult to actually be staying by myself. I still, up to now, find it difficult to be in the house alone. It's only now that I'm actually getting to grips with it ... I get a bit scared in the night, I sleep with the lights on around the house ... I think now I'm getting used to it ... bit by bit. (3)

Care leavers in several studies emphasised concerns about the poor quality of their accommodation and the need for better housing options (3, 11, 24, 42). One young person reflected on the appalling housing conditions they had experienced as a care leaver and said:

I told them that I can't live in places like that where the water is coming down the walls and it smelt and there was no heating. (3)

In a study of care leavers who went onto University (45), young people reported that friends were particularly important, as there were often no adults on whom they could rely. Young people made friends more easily in halls of residence. Yet some care leavers missed out on halls of residence accommodation because delays in local authority decision-making meant that funding was too late. Some young people were also more isolated from opportunities to make friends, as they were confined to living in council accommodation to which they had been allocated when leaving care. The accommodation was often far away from other university students and some distance from the university itself. Inadequate financial support was a common problem (3, 45). This caused considerable stress and anxiety, as described by the following young person:

I need things for my course like a computer, I need to buy art folders and notebooks ... I've spoken to my social worker and I don't know what she's going to do ... I just can't afford them with the £43 that they give. I have to eat. I have to dress myself. I have to buy like, you know stuff to have, you know shampoo whatever. So it's really hard. (3)

Care leavers (45) found that they had to take on paid work to supplement financial support from the University. They found that employment conflicted with academic demands and sometimes resulted in failure to submit assignments or meant that they were unable to

prepare adequately for their exams. Lack of money also meant that their social lives became limited and prevented them from engaging fully in university life. Provision of accommodation during university holidays was also an issue for some care leavers (42, 70). At the time of Jackson's report (45) only one university was known to have a comprehensive policy relating to care leavers and 96% did not offer any pastoral support to students known to have been previously looked after. Subsequently, more than 81 universities now display the Buttle UK Quality Mark for Care Leavers, which recognises institutions that reach out to young people in care and provide extra help in the form of bursaries, accommodation, advice or study support. The Buttle Quality mark scheme ends in 2015 and it is unclear whether the principles underpinning the award will be upheld by institutions beyond this time. The Coalition Government has said that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will receive additional assistance to help meet increased tuition fees. However, there are doubts as to whether such subsidies will be sufficient as tuition and living costs increase (see <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/57018.html>).

The young people described how difficult it was to understand what support was available because entitlements varied depending on the LA and their care history. Variation left many care leavers unsure as to what they were entitled to, particularly in relation to accommodation, university, and health.

The importance of learning independence skills was emphasised by many care leavers (12, 24, 39, 42, 72, 92). One area where the young people needed particular support was money management, as the following young person said:

I think the most thing that, um, I needed help with really was financial area ... because you don't really know how expensive things can be. (3)

The trauma, poor preparation and isolation experienced by young people leaving care could also trigger mental health problems (22). Care leavers in one study were very critical of their GPs and thought that GPs had not listened to them and they did not feel that they could discuss their mental health issues with them (19). Care leavers stated that they felt ill prepared to manage their own healthcare and wanted more advice on health (47). Overall

care leavers (24) thought that there was a general lack of understanding of the issues that they faced and that there was a need for better public awareness.

YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

Many of the looked after young people living in residential care thought that they had limited opportunities to form positive relationships with trusted adults (24, 86). The lack of love and affection from staff was noted by young people, as expressed in this quote:

Way too institutionalized children's homes. Do you know how much we needed a hug? (24)

Some young people felt that staff in residential homes did not really care about them and were just 'doing it for the money' (86). The young people perceived the staff's lack of encouragement around academic achievement, as symptomatic of their lack of care. The following young person described how nobody took on the responsibility for ensuring that the children went to school in his residential home:

I was in a children's home, there were ten of us, and only two actually went to school. Kids in care just don't go to school. They (the staff at the children's home) woke you up, but that was it. They woke you up if you had a school to go to. If you didn't you were just left to wake up when you wanted. (35)

Lack of care was also evident in another study (77) where young people complained that staff did not take incidents such as drug taking, drinking and smoking seriously enough. However, there were also examples of terrific support from staff, as in this example:

They (residential home staff) helped me with my schoolwork. They helped me with my GCSEs and to pass them, even though it was the roughest time of my life. (42)

Young people (60) stated that it was important that units were in good locations, in pleasant areas that were close to town and that were not in rural areas or on an estate. Location could have a detrimental affect on maintaining relationships with family and friends as did restrictions and rules. This was particularly accentuated for children in therapeutic residential care, as the following young person described:

At (name of house within therapeutic residential home) I was only allowed out for 15 minutes at a time. My friend lived 10 minutes walk away. So by the time I got there, it was time to go back. I lost confidence and I didn't see the point of doing much. (34)

Peer violence was a particular concern for young people living in residential care (7). Peer violence included direct physical assault and destruction of personal belongings. Other types of bullying and violence included excluding someone from a group, verbal abuse – generally name calling and spreading rumours concerning sexual reputations, family or ethnic appearance; and unwelcome sexual behaviours such as flashing and inappropriate touching.

In one study (42), some of the young people described wanting more boundaries and discipline, particularly for those living in residential care. This was mainly reported by the older or care leaving groups who retrospectively thought that although the lack of discipline had been fun at the time, it was detrimental to them in the long term:

I'd say that the majority of my life in care was good, purely – because I did what I wanted, you know what I mean? I think this is where the problem is – the fact that all these care kids got so much freedom. They got so many rights and I'm not saying rights is a bad thing, but what I'm saying is you've got to have some sort of system, where, you know, a kid can't just get up in the morning and decide – I know what's best for me, so I'm not going to school. (42)

Whilst negative stigma was an issue for all young people in care, it seemed to be particularly strong for those in residential care, as described by the following young people:

They think that you smash windaes (windows), get pissed (drunk), take cars, are mental. (25)

When you say you are in a children's home, people think you are a tramp or something. (12)

For some looked after children the negative image of residential care had an impact on their ability to make friends, as described by the following young person:

The (name of therapeutic residential home) did not help me find friends. Not many people wanted to be friends with children's homes. (34)

Another young person described how a benefit of being in residential care was being around other young people who understood what he had been through:

It's a fine place to be, better than being in foster care, because there is more kids here your own age that have been through the same sort of thing. (25)

YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN THE SECURE SETTINGS

In this section, we report on what young people in prisons, youth offending institutions and secure units have said about their care.

In one study of looked after young people who were in custody, the young people described finding comfort from being in prison. Typically, these were young people who had lived in residential care and who had received little aftercare support. One young person described prison as:

It's just like a home, people get used to it and they think they need to go back. And they go out there and they think they just can't cope, because we get everything in here. Do you know what I mean? We get our food and everything. (86)

The young people's comments suggest that they had little preparation for life after their release. Similarly, care leavers identified the lack of support available for them in or when leaving young offender institutes or prisons. Some young people (6) thought that although staff could be caring, this was often outweighed by resource constraints and ethos of punishment. Young people also complained that social workers did not keep in touch (86).

Young people wanted larger rooms, more control of heating and ventilation, better access to secure outside areas and to be placed in units that were closer to home (63). The young people living in secure establishments also felt that they had little choice about what they ate and what they could do with their time. They had regular health checks and nursing care, but felt that mental health issues, such as high levels of stress, were not so well

addressed (63). Boredom was a major issue for many young people and the availability of after school and evening activities were an important way of keeping occupied (6).

Young people in the secure estate also identified a lack of awareness of the support that should be available under the Leaving Care Act 2000, or what support might be available for those who did not meet the eligibility criteria (86).

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

In a survey (71) of looked after children, almost half of the 2,203 young people who responded said that they had mental or emotional health problems. Many of the young people linked their difficulties with their experiences prior to entering care. Yet a number of studies (1, 12, 24, 29, 63, 83, 97) have reported on the lack of support for looked after young people with regard to their mental health, in particular in relation to depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem and anxiety

Young people described how hard they found it to talk about the 'bad things' that had happened to them. They needed time to develop trusting relationships and to learn to trust adults before they felt able to confide (10, 73, 93, 97). One young person said:

Find it hard to talk about when I was raped. Because it is upsetting and sometimes can't find the right words. (10)

The young people valued specific staff members and the opportunities that therapeutic interventions gave to build relationships of trust (93). They found that having a specific member of staff to support them added value to the purpose of the intervention itself by giving them a sense of feeling cared for. Having some control in the planning of the session was also defined by the young people as important (73, 93). Some of the looked after young people also valued non-verbal communication methods such as play, arts, story-telling and sculpting, etc. (75, 93). Whilst some young people valued individual sessions, others preferred group sessions because it helped them to realise that there were others who had experienced similar things. Being in a group also helped young people recognise their own feelings and problems by hearing others talk about their feelings (75).

The young people expressed concerns that help-seeking would lead to labelling or stigma or would be recorded on their case file and affect their employment in the future (1, 73, 97). One young person explained why she had not sought help:

People would think I am a nutcase. (1)

Another reason young people had not accessed mental health services was a concern that mental health professionals would not really understand their backgrounds or care experiences.

I need someone who REALLY understands my situation. (1)

Because I find it easier if people have been through the situation and understand it or have an idea how I'm coping or feeling. (1)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored literature giving the views of looked after children whose specific circumstances may mean that they face additional issues to those identified in the previous chapter. The chapter examines the range of issues that looked after children may face, some of whom may belong to several of the groups identified. It was also evident that for some of the areas identified, research giving the views of looked after children themselves was limited. These limitations highlight the need for further research to explore the views and needs of a more diverse range of looked after children.

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