

Challenging stigma in the care system

bright spots insights

About Bright Spots

The Bright Spots Programme is funded by the Hadley Trust and is a partnership between Coram Voice and the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford. The Programme supports local authorities to systematically listen to their children in care and care leavers about the things that are important to them.

Since 2013, we have worked with children and young people to develop two new sets of well-being indicators measured by our online surveys; one for children in care aged 4 upwards (Your Life, Your Care) and one for care leavers (Your Life Beyond Care).

The Bright Spots Programme complements existing outcomes data that focuses on adults' perspectives and objective measures by exploring subjective well-being, i.e. how children feel. Are they happy, safe and feel they are doing well?

By working with over 50 local authorities and gathering more than **10,000 responses** from children and care leavers we have gained insight into the key question – what makes life good for children in care and care leavers? Our insight papers seek to share some of this learning.

“Do adults do things that make you feel embarrassed about being in care?” is a key question in the Bright Spots surveys because children and young people felt this was important. Our research shows that being singled out, being stereotyped and treated differently is an ongoing issue for both children in care and care leavers..

What is stigma and how does it affect children in care and care leavers?

When you are stigmatised people make negative assumptions about you based on a specific characteristic - e.g. how you look or the group you belong to. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting”. Children in care and care leavers report experiencing stigma and worrying about being labelled or judged if their care background is known (Selwyn et al, 2015; Baker, 2017).

“When they speak to you or about you like you are a thing like another carer said to my carer, “How long have you had them?” and I thought this was embarrassing and rude.”
(11-18yrs)

“Due to the stereotypes, I remain quiet about being a care leaver or someone that has been in care.”
(Care leaver)

The Bright Spots national findings

Our latest reports on children in care and care leavers (2018; 2019) found that:

- About 1 in 8 young people in care (12%) aged 11-18yrs felt adults did things which made them **‘feel embarrassed about being in care’**. Although most young people did not report being made to feel embarrassed, the rates who did varied from 6% to 25% in local authorities.
- 1 in 10 care leavers felt that, as a care leaver, they have been treated worse than other young people.



‘Adults do things to make me feel embarrassed about being in care.’

‘As a care leaver I have been treated...’



“I’ve had people react very negatively about me being a care leaver because they thought that meant that my family didn’t like me or didn’t want me and I’ve been made fun of.”
(Care leaver)

How can local authorities help children?

Children in care and care leavers do not want to be treated differently from their peers. Despite this, children in our surveys described how the behaviours and actions of their social workers, teachers and others who support them can make them feel singled out and reinforce the stigma associated with care experience. They highlighted the following attitudes and practices as ones where change is needed.

Language

The language of care can be stigmatising: jargon such as 'placement' or 'contact' can contribute to children's sense of feeling different (Independent Care Review, 2020). Children and young people report that adults use this language both in written records and when they talk to or about them.

TACT has worked with young people to create an alternative dictionary for people who work in social care to highlight words that are problematic and change the way professionals talk about children in care (TACT, 2019).

Owning your narrative

Comments in our surveys often centre around young people not getting to own their own personal story. Young people describe how their personal details are shared in front of them without their consent. (Selwyn and Baker, 2018)

**"[They] refer to me as my care status."
(11-18yrs)**

**"When we are out and they start talking to random strangers and tell them I'm in care. I don't want random people to know my personal info. It should be me saying it not them."
(11-18yrs)**

**"Professionals that work with me come to my place of work where my colleagues are and want to have all kinds of different meetings with me. My social worker rings my manager when she wants to talk to me and people ask me questions about my social worker and other workers."
(Care leaver)**

Spotlight on Bromley

Bromley discussed their Bright Spots findings with their children in care council (LinCC) and asked them to reflect on three areas related to stigma that children had mentioned in the survey:

1. Your carer being a different ethnicity from you
2. PEP meetings being held at school; and
3. Foster carers talking to other people about you being in care

The group came up with commitments that they wanted Bromley to implement:

- Have an understanding of our opinions/needs.
- Make workers not wear their lanyards in public or mention that they are workers when we are around them.
- Teach social workers/carers in training how important it is not to embarrass us about being in care.

**"Showing their badge when in public, such as cinema etc. for discounts or wearing during parental meetings in public."
(11-18yrs)**

Spotlight on West Sussex

Following their Bright Spots survey findings the West Sussex children in care council held **'Treat me the same'** workshops on addressing stigma, focusing particularly on children being taken out of class to attend meetings and reviews. Workshops involved several stakeholders including the virtual school and the corporate parenting panel. They created a series of videos for schools, professionals and young people in care. A number of changes came out of the workshops:

- The specialist nurse for looked after children has committed to arranging health assessments after school or during the school holidays wherever possible.
- The Independent Reviewing Service has committed to holding reviews in the young person's home or a venue other than school to suit the young person's needs.
- The Virtual School Head speaks to designated teachers and head teachers at every meeting about holding meetings outside of school hours and actively challenges any professionals that use schools for visits/checks.

The workshops were highlighted in their 2019 Ofsted report as an example of how children are involved in developing services.

School

Children report that meetings about being in care are sometimes held during school time meaning that they are taken out of lessons and feel stigmatised in comparison to their classmates. This has a doubly negative impact of disrupting their education, and can lead to unwelcome questions from their peers. (Wood and Selwyn, 2017; Mannay et al., 2017; Selwyn and Baker, 2018)

Young people also described how their care status is emphasised by social workers wearing ID badges when they meet at school or in the community (Selwyn et al, 2015, Baker, 2017).

One of the early successes from the Bright Spots Programme came from a quote in a survey: *“I hate that when the register comes up on the screen and others in the class can see that I am CLA. It winds me up even though everyone knows. I don’t like to be different”* (8-11yrs). When the local authority were alerted to what the child had written, they notified all schools connected to them through the Virtual School and asked them to immediately stop this practice.

“The teachers say in front all the class [that] I have to do something about me being in care.”
(11-18yrs)

“I get taken out of classes to see a mentor because I’m in care.”
(11-18yrs)

“When teachers talk about families it makes me feel embarrassed.”
(11-18yrs)

“If it is parents’ evening people question me if that is my mum and they say she looks nothing like me.”
(11-18yrs)

Spotlight on Sheffield

Sheffield responded to their Bright Spots findings by designing a school assembly session to be rolled out in all primary and secondary schools across the council to address the stigma felt by their children in care. Children called their working group **‘The Assembly Squad’** and are working in partnership with the Virtual School and the communications team to design an interactive session that will include games, a quiz and an animation telling the stories of children in care, written by the young people. There will also be ‘myth busters’ and top tips. The Children in Care Council will launch the assembly with designated teachers at the next Virtual School Conference, with a view to roll it out to every Sheffield school and have plans for it to be available to purchase as a toolkit nationally.

Spotlight on Hertfordshire

In the Your Life Your Care survey we ask 8-11 year olds if they got the chance to help the teacher. Hertfordshire wanted to improve how children felt in this area after they got their survey results where a slightly higher proportion of children reported this as an issue for them compared to children in other local authorities.

The Virtual School decided to focus on **‘Being Trusted and Helping Out’**. They spoke to designated teachers at briefings, conferences, and as part of termly visits to schools with looked after children – exploring whether opportunities to hold positions of trust and responsibility were available to children, and whether those who joined mid-year were more likely to miss out on positions of responsibility that were voted on.

When the survey was repeated two years later a higher proportion (86%) of 8-11yrs felt they were given opportunities in school to be trusted in comparison with children (78%) in other local authorities.

Hertfordshire have also developed **Project Positive** to raise the aspirations of children in care and reduce the stigma associated with care leavers applying for jobs. The idea for the campaign came from a care leaver who was frustrated by the negative stereotype that she felt ‘followed her around’. The campaign highlighted the reasons for employing care leavers and the additional skills that they may have gained from their personal experiences – such as being used to voice their concerns and opinions in meetings with professionals or solving problems independently.

- Hertfordshire Project Positive
<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/childrens-social-care/leaving-care/project-positive/project-positive.aspx>
see also <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/dec/11/care-leavers-challenge-stigma>

“Patronise me. Tell me I can’t do certain things because I’m in care. Tell my school to segregate me and my other peers who are in care because we are apparently less academic.”
(11-18yrs)

“Refused renting a house due to bad reputation of all care leavers (3 plus landlords and counting).”
(Care leaver)

Bright Spots: Key messages from children and young people

- Change the language of social care - don't use words that make us feel different. Help us feel normal by avoiding acronyms and words that do not make sense to us.
- Get rid of ways of working that mark us out as different from other children and young people.
- Let us control who knows about our care status and how we share this - do not identify us with your actions (wearing badges, taking us out of class for meetings) or words (referring to carers, looked after status).
- Train foster carers, social workers, independent reviewing officers and personal advisers to discuss our care status with us, and empower us to take charge of our own stories.
- Train and support teachers to understand what it is like to be in care, to give us opportunities to be trusted (such as taking the register or showing visitors around), and to not single us out in the classroom as children in care.
- Recognise our potential, praise us when we do well and work with us to promote positive messages about children in care and care leavers.

Any questions about this paper, our work or how to get involved in the Bright Spots programme? Then get in touch:

brightspots@coramvoice.org.uk

Resources

North Yorkshire - Changing the Narrative
<https://youtu.be/GIQj7jffd0>

TACT - Language that cares
https://www.tactcare.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/03/TACT-Language-that-cares-2019_online.pdf

Kids in care, changing the language – VOIPIC
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-48466031/kids-in-care-changing-the-language>

Things not to say to a child in care - Your Space West Sussex
<https://youtu.be/7fix5CYICt8>

Bright Spots related research

National findings and research reviews from the Bright Spots Programme

<https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots-2/bright-spots-publications/>

- Baker et al (2019) **Snapshot 2018: Our Lives Beyond Care**: Care leavers' views on their well-being in 2018
- Briheim-Crookall et al (2018) **Snapshot 2018: Our Lives, Our Care**: Looked after children's views on their well-being in 2018
- Baker, C (2017) **Care leavers' views of their transition to adulthood**: a rapid review of the evidence
- Selwyn et al (2015) **Children and Young People's views on being in care**

Other References

- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Mannay, D., Staples, E., Hallet, S., Roberts, L., Rees, A., Evans, R. and Andrews, D. (2017) *Understanding the educational experiences and opinions, attainment, achievement and aspirations of looked after children in Wales*. Cardiff: Cascade
- Selwyn, J. and Baker, C. (2018) *'I just want to feel normal': looked after young people's experiences of feeling different*. CELCIS.
- **The Promise (2020)**, Scottish Independent Care Review
- Wood, M. and Selwyn, J. (2017) *'Looked after children and young people's views on what matters to their subjective well-being'*. *Adoption and Fostering*, vol. 41, pp. 20-34

“I don't want to be identified as a young person in care. I'm worried that my name will be read out at a ceremony and then people would find out.”
(11-18yrs)