

Introduction

These are quotations from people who have experienced being looked after; some are adults reflecting on their childhood, others are children still in residential or foster care. The quotations are drawn from *Extraordinary Lives*, *Celebrating Success*, and *Let's Face It*. They describe children's views of their experiences of being looked after. Many of them are positive but others describe difficult, frightening experiences which left children feeling excluded, hurt or damaged by their time in care.

It is also important to emphasise that the care trajectory for many looked after children will include experiences of a variety of care settings (both at home and away from home).

Looked after at home

There is very little research on the experience of children who are looked after at home. Most of what we know is through comments from children looked after away from home comparing their current situation with that of their time at home. Obviously not all children who are looked after at home are experiencing such serious problems but many will live in chaotic and frightening environments.

- *Things were pretty bad. My mum was always drinking. We never really had much. Being in care changed my life so much. From having this really, really unstable environment to this family environment where everybody took a shower every night and we had decent food to eat. It was just great I went from one extreme to another, from having this really, really unstable environment where I could go and do as I pleased, right into this, sort of, family environment and everybody had rules. Two loving parents and they moulded me into the person I am now.*
- *When my mum was drinking she'd go into her room and we wouldn't see her for three to four days and we'd just be left. My dad left when I was six, he's quite a violent man. He's been in prison for hitting women and stuff... My dad's always been a wanderer. He's never really been around to support my mum. When I was a baby her mum died from cancer and I think she found it quite hard. She started drinking when she was a teenager, which is quite young and I think that was her way of coping and then in the end that became a really big problem for her, watching her kids go into foster care.*
- *It saddens me to this day to hear social workers say 'Oh, you've got to keep kids in their family'. It's a mantra! And I really strongly believe in my case being taken out of an abusive situation helped me, and helped my brother and sister.*

- *Having nice things and not being dirty and cold and hungry all the time. And not having to do work all the time, being at some adult's beck and call ... having privacy, having your own room, having simple things that others take for granted, like deodorant and sanitary towels when you needed them.*
- *There was consistency there and as an adult now with children of my own I can say that consistency is an enormous help in a situation where the rest of your life has been inconsistent. You've had parents, you didn't always know if they were going to be sober or drunk, violent or not violent, there or not there – to have routine and consistency, to be able to depend on things, that was invaluable.*

Foster care

Many children thrive in foster care and when it works it allows children the consistency that comes from living with the same adult (s) and experiencing the warmth and nurture that can come from family living. Some children, however, find it easier to be in residential care where they experience no crisis of loyalty and also do not feel like an outsider. Children in foster care are acutely sensitive to being treated differently from foster carers' own children.

- *They had kids of their own and they made us sit down at dinner and eat it all until we finished it, but for their own kids they could sit anywhere and leave anything they wanted*
- *When me and my brother are out with my foster dad and he meets his friends he says, 'These are my two laddies,' and it feels good. It makes you feel accepted, like you belong.*
- *The good things were that I got on with my carer and we done things together, we went out to the pictures or we went swimming. Every week we would do something, get out and do something, she took me to her family's house as well to make me feel like it was my home.*
- *I went into care with my big sister so we weren't separated which made thing a lot easier on me because I could imagine how scary it would be to go out at 5 years old into somebody else's house and you're going to be staying with them and you don't know who they are- that's a pretty scary thing. But I had my big sister (aged 6) there as well so that was a wee bit reassuring.*

- *Foster carers act like they are your family at New Year and stuff like that and you feel, I don't know how to describe it, you feel, well obviously a stranger because it's somebody else's family – I don't know it just felt weird. At the children's home at the New Year and everything we were all just like a big family and it was good.*
- *To be honest, they never really did anything special, they were just ... just being as fair to us as they would to their own children. Like, they never really treated us any differently. They took us on holiday to Florida because they didn't want us to feel left out.*
- *So it was the whole family that fostered you, it wasn't just the mum and dad. It's really got to work that way, I think.*

Residential care

Children's experiences of residential care are very variable. Some experience a sense of relief and safety when they are admitted for others it is a frightening and confusing environment. Factors that create particular anxiety are the unpredictability and violence of other residents, the sense of constant turmoil and change and the constant shifting population of staff and children. Others feel cared for nurtured and supported and feel staff would do anything for them.

- *If I ever broke down, if I ever needed any help at all, they would help me. I know for a fact they would help me.*
- *At home you just dragged yourself out of bed and went to school, no breakfast or anything. In care ... you got up, had a wash and got dressed. Your clothes were pressed for you and you got a good breakfast and everything. They cared for you properly, like a parent should.*
- *There's quite a few go out of their way to wind you up. In your face and telling you everything is your fault, getting at you or laughing at you because you are in care. They're waiting for you to get bothered and then slam the sanctions on you. I know quite a few that did that – you would say something and then they'd say "That's it you've missed out on an outing" or "that's it upstairs, you're grounded"*
- *Being in care is very difficult. There are a lot of distractions about and I found that I couldn't concentrate with my work if I had too many things on my mind, and the staff didn't really encourage me to do my homework*

- *I don't have much time to myself – there is always something happening eg an admission, a fight, so I have no time to do homework*
- *Being looked after in a children's home is very unstable and frightening. It's not the staff that make you feel frightened it's the atmosphere. I don't believe that children's homes are homes. I believe they are institutions and the children in them are institutionalised.*
- *I get on really well with the staff and the kids are really great. I enjoy the place I live and it's the first permanent place where I've been.*
- *The staff didn't even play a game of pool with you. It used to be just work and that's it. Staff can come in and talk to you or they can go out their way and try to get something done for you. Like me, I was going on holiday with my mate and they were getting the passport and running about trying to get it all done. For others it's just work and they don't treat you any different, they don't go out of their way to talk to you.*
- *The place I'm in just now, I've been there three years and I couldn't even name how many staff have came and went there's been that many. It's a good home but I'm just saying that if you get to know a new staff you talk to them and you feel alright with them and then they leave. Then I think why do I even bother talking to them because they are just going to be away in a couple of months.*
- *We have strangers coming in and sometimes we see them again and sometimes we don't. It's pretty difficult to have people understand you or know you when they're just coming to do one shift or two shifts and then leaving again. I've lived here for four years and some of the staff, most of the staff, I don't know them anymore. So apart from my key worker nobody really knows my history or what I'm about*
- *The staff in the home are great. For me it was better than being in foster care because though they [foster carers] act like they're your family, it's still someone else's family but in the children's home I just felt more accepted.*
- *I think most young people are safe in care but I don't know. I'd probably say it was 50-50. I still don't trust a lot of people , because as I say I don't know them , they're not my family so why should I trust them? They're there to look after me but you do get some bad ones.*

- *You're not safe or protected. Some people get put into care for their own safety. You get put into care but it gets 10 times worse maybe because of your peer group, but also because, I hate to say it, staff. Some staff will say "do it or I'll batter you" or "go or I'll boot you up the arse!" If young people hang about the office, they're hanging about to say something or don't feel safe. Sometimes you'll say nothing, they'll tell you to bolt, that makes you feel unsafe. It can make you feel worse, even more down.*
- *I think I would rather be in care than be at my mum and dad's environment. I wouldn't have had a better life at my mum and dad's than I would have had at the children's home. I've had a better bringing up in childhood being in care than I would have, I think, at my mum and dad's bit.*
- *You see, if you're in care, the thing you want is for someone to trust you. If you can see that somebody trusts you it makes you feel happier. It makes you want to get it right in your life. It makes you want to get your life sorted out.*

Social workers

The relationship with their social worker is also really important for children and they are quite clear that this relationship can have an enormous impact on their lives whether negative or positive.

- *I thought that none of my social workers liked me because they were all leaving.*
- *When you change social worker you have to start from scratch again and explain things. It's all in your notes, but if you have half a drawer full of notes it's difficult for anyone to remember. I think social workers need to develop a relationship with ... the young people. They need to be there for them, they need to give them stability and support.*
- *My social worker? I really, really like that guy. He's helped me a lot. I feel like he's thrown another lifeline to me. He used to come and see me a lot and that helped. It's like the social worker goes out the window and a father comes in and talks to you and you know that you are going to really get somewhere.*

Family contact

Children are often desperate to maintain contact with their family but this can be very difficult to manage particularly if they are placed at some distance from their home and this can add considerable pressure to children's lives. Even where there has been abuse or neglect children want to see their family and worry about them. Separation from siblings can be particularly difficult and children often find this hard to accept or understand.

- *They split us all up. I think if we had all been together I may not have got involved in crime, drugs and smoking cannabis. I think that is where some of my anger is from*
- *I want to stay with my mum more often. We miss her, we always miss her. We all want to see our mum. I sometimes feel really sad talking about it. Now I don't want to stay with my mum because then it would be sad on my gran because I have been living with her for a long time. I still want to stay with my mum though and my gran. It's a hard decision.*
- *I had to get 3 buses , 6 buses a night- 3 buses to get to school and 3 buses to get back and then if i was going out after dinner it would be 3 buses to get out and 3 buses to get back. I liked going to school because that's where I got to see my mates*
- *To get put in care away from your family is a hard thing to cope with*
- *In this home anyway you get outings, videos, wee treats like you wouldn't get in your family but even though you do get that you're still not happy because every human, no matter who you are, you still want to be with your family. it's just a human thing.*
- *Nobody understands how much I miss my family, however bad living at home was. People can't understand that a foster family are nothing like a real family and that I feel so alone.*

Community and school

The impact of being looked after extends beyond the living situation and affects children's experiences in the community and school.

- *They started to hit me because I was in care and they thought they could get away with it until one day I turned round and smacked one of them and that's when they all started verbally bullying me, then it went more physical then I got battered and that's when it got even more physical and I started running away so I didn't need to go to school. I started dogging school and running away*
- *Well it's bad because ever since I've been in care the kids at school are being nasty to me – and I get upset because I see with their families and I am not*