Nuffield Foundation

Grown up?

# Generation abandoned?

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## Young people in care are being left further behind: we need to examine why care is not providing the right foundation for adulthood

The path to becoming an adult has never been uniform, with clear class and racial disparities shaping young people's lives. But recent changes in education, employment and societal norms[1] have fundamentally altered its course. Young people are spending more time in education and this, combined with the difficulties in finding employment and the prohibitive cost of housing, is delaying financial independence. Two-thirds of 19- to 21-year-olds still live with their parents. Along with what we know about the continuous development of the brain, these shifts have led to the understanding that adolescence – the phase of life between childhood and adulthood – now extends well into a person's 20s.

Generation Z, or Gen Z, has been significantly buffeted by these changes, according to measures of happiness and well-being[2]. However, one group stands out as being at most risk of being left behind: children in the care of the state. Their journey to independence forces us to reflect on what it means to be 'in care' and whether it offers the right foundation for adult life.

## A widening gulf between children in care and their peers

Most young people can navigate the extended path to adulthood because they can remain living with their family. Over the last 25 years, the proportion of 23-year-olds living with their parents has risen by 13 percentage points[3]. The 'Bank of Mum and Dad' does not shut down when young people reach 18 and, more importantly, the safety blanket of supportive family relationships helps them through the challenges of a prolonged adolescence. Somewhat paradoxically, achieving adult independence today is more rooted in family dependency than ever.

In contrast, most children in care, by definition, do not have a family to rely on. While almost two-thirds of 19- to 21-year-olds live with their parents[4], only 20% of care-experienced young people of this age live with either relatives or their former foster carers[5]. The vast majority are expected to be almost entirely self-sufficient by the age of 18. These young people have not benefitted from the expanding educational opportunities available to their peers, and they cannot draw on family assets to help them with a housing deposit. They are expected to be independent well before their peers but face further to climb. Little wonder that repeated attempts by governments to close the gap in life chances between those in the care system and their peers have failed.

**20%**

**of care experienced 19- to 21-year olds live with either relatives or their former foster carers.**

'Corporate parenting' refers to the responsibility of local authorities, working with other statutory agencies[6], to provide the same level of care and protection for children who are 'looked after' that we, as parents, would for our own. As profound economic and social changes continue to delay independence, it is time to rethink this role. If we fail to do so, care-experienced young people risk falling further behind.

## Pushed into independence too soon

In England and Wales, the care system currently operates on the assumption that young people will manage on their own at the age of 18, if not before. Indeed, the law only requires children in care to live under adult supervision and protection until they are 16. While young people in foster care have the right to stay with their foster family until the age of 21, this depends on their carer's consent[7], and two-thirds leave after they turn 18. Meanwhile, those in residential care have no right to remain living in their homes beyond this age, and post-18 provision for this group is inconsistent, with some local authorities currently offering no support at all[8].

Many care-experienced children are pushed into 'adulthood' long before the formal leaving care age of 18. Some leave care before 18 and are expected to live independently. Others remain in care but at 16 or 17 are placed in independent or semi-independent housing or 'supported accommodation' despite this kind of provision being illegal for children who need ongoing care, and supervision. Around 10,000 children in care are currently living in independent, semi-independent or supported accommodation in England[9]. The number of 16- and 17-year-olds legally in the care of the state and living in these circumstances has more than doubled in the last decade to at least one in every three[10], and likely more. In contrast, in the non-care population, 93% of 16-year-olds live with their parents[11].

## The reality of supported accommodation

The Department for Education describes supported accommodation as follows: "As children grow up and approach adulthood, they gradually gain more independence from their parents. The care system seeks to replicate this transition to independence for children. While most children in the care system will be best placed in foster care or a children's home, from the age of 16, a looked-after child can leave care and/or move to supported accommodation if they are ready for it. This provision can be appropriate for some older children where it is what they want and where it can meet their needs and keep them safe as part of a carefully managed transition to independence. The aim of supported accommodation is to support young people to develop their independence in preparation for adult living while keeping them safe in a homely and nurturing environment."[12]

In practice, however, the extent to which young people feel "safe in a homely and nurturing environment" varies considerably from provider to provider. The best services create a family-like setting where young people have the same safety and freedoms as their peers while knowing that they can fully depend on an adult. That said, the regulations governing supported accommodation are weaker than those for children's homes or foster care placements. Staff are expected to "maintain regular and sufficient contact with the young person to be able to identify any safeguarding risks, mental and physical health issues, signs of harm, and/or if the young person has gone missing[13]." There is less emphasis on education in the broadest sense; nourishing positive development, working out how to live life together with others, navigating the tension between individual autonomy and society's expectations, or developing relationship skills[14].

16- and 17-year-olds living in supported accommodation may only see a care worker once or twice a week. A social worker will typically visit once every six weeks. Young people are expected to manage their finances, shop, cook and clean for themselves, and make everyday decisions about how they spend their time, largely without the consistent input of adults.

## Why do we treat children in care differently?

There are two reasons why children in care are pushed into independence earlier than their peers.

Firstly, children in care are frequently perceived as more 'grown up' or 'adult' – a bias known as 'adultification' that is commonly reported in relation to children from racialised minorities[15]. Adultification particularly affects unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who make up around 45% of those living in independent and semi-independent accommodation[16]. While it is often argued that such arrangements help care-experienced young people prepare for adulthood, parents would never consider this a suitable option for their own children. Moreover, children who have experienced trauma are at higher risk of delayed social and emotional development, so this tendency towards adultification is particularly flawed.

Secondly, more children are being placed in independent or semi-independent living as a result of the collapse in care provision, financial pressures on local authorities, and a sharp rise in the number of older children entering the system. The proportion of 16-year-olds has increased by 52% since the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning this age group now accounts for 29% of all children in care[17]. At the same time, the number of foster carers is falling, there is a shortage of residential care, and the private sector market has been able to set the price for limited places.

## Facing an uphill struggle in the face of changing norms

Children in the care of the state are not only expected to become independent much earlier than their peers but are also less equipped to thrive in the challenging socio-economic context facing Gen Z.

They are less likely to be able to take advantage of extended educational opportunities because their journey through primary and secondary education is more likely to have been disrupted. Compared to their peers, children in care are twice as likely to have been absent from school[18] and four to five times more likely to have been suspended or permanently excluded[19]. Many leave education early and, by the age of 16 or 17, children in care are twice as likely to be out of education, employment or training[20].

In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that care-experienced young people have fewer qualifications than their peers, putting them at a greater disadvantage in a more challenging labour market. At GCSE level, they are five times less likely to achieve a grade 5 or above in English and Maths[21]. By the age of 19, only 15% go to university as opposed to 47% of young people who did not grow up in care[22]. In fact, at this age, two-fifths of care leavers are not in education, employment or training[23].

Even beyond education and employment, children in care are at greater risk of compounding disadvantage. They are more likely to become teenage parents[24], experience single

motherhood, or face a relationship breakdown[25]. One-quarter of both the homeless[26] and the prison population[27] in England are care-experienced. Their health outcomes are also disproportionately poor; those who spend time in care during childhood are three to four times more likely to report their health as 'not good', and four and a half times more likely to die prematurely[28].

**1/4**

**of both the homeless and the prison population in England are care-experienced.**

## Rethinking what it means to be 'in care'

Efforts to improve the life chances of those who have been in care have largely focused on enhancing support for young care leavers. However, this approach fails to consider whether the experience of being 'in care' provides the basis for a successful transition to adulthood.

One predictor of greater resilience in care-experienced adults is growing up in a stable family environment, such as with a foster family or with relatives[29]. This comes as no surprise. Consistent, loving, and trusting relationships built during childhood provide a vital foundation for *all* young people as they move into adulthood with confidence.

Despite this, our care system is currently hard-wired to disrupt these crucial relationships. Placements and care plans are often short-term, lacking a sustained focus on a child's needs throughout their childhood, let alone into adulthood. The social care, health and education professionals involved in a child's life are constantly changing. Ties with local communities – neighbours, friends and football teams– are severed when a child is frequently moved.

Little wonder that by the time young people leave care, many feel isolated. One in three say they have no idea where to get support[30] and 10% rely entirely on their leaving care worker or personal advisor – someone whom they might see once a week[31] – for emotional support.

Navigating the difficult journey to adulthood requires more than a personal advisor. It relies on having trusted, long-term relationships with adults who accept you unconditionally, who will guide, support, cajole, challenge and inspire you, and who can 'bail you out' when things go wrong. Such relationships need to be built from the moment children enter the care system, not as they are about to leave it.

**In 2024, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory asked a group of young people about their experiences of being in care. Here are some of the insights they shared.**

*"[I was] moved 5/6 times within a year, and this definitely affected me trusting people as I couldn't build relationships with professionals for fear of the fact it would be pointless."*

**Female, 22 yrs, care leaver**

*"Once [I had been] moved around a few times I learnt there was no point getting to know people because it wouldn't be long till I got told to pack my bags ready for another move [...] This then leads to feeling as though I can't trust no one."*

**Female, 18 yrs, care leaver**

*"I don't think I was encouraged to have trusted relationships. I think I was encouraged to notice and keep in mind that social workers leave, staff are hard to retain, and to not get too comfortable, and almost treated as if I should be thankful that I have somewhere in the first place, but not to get again too comfortable."*

**Female, 22 yrs, care leaver**[32]

Recognising this instability in relationship-building, the 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care[33] proposed that by 2027, no young person should leave care without at least two loving relationships. The Department for Education has since expanded the number of family-finding and befriending programmes while improving support for children leaving residential care[34]. While welcome, these initiatives focus on repairing broken bonds, rather than changing the experience of being in care to prevent the fracturing of relationships in the first place.

## A different approach

What would the care system look like if it prioritised the development of lifelong connections for care-experienced children? Would young people still leave care at the fixed age of 18, or even earlier? Would public services be judged by their ability to shore up lifelong loving relationships around a child in care, not only whether they keep them safe? It would certainly require a fundamental shift in mindset and approach. It would also take a village; social workers cannot be solely responsible for building stable relationships around a child. GPs, teachers, neighbours and many others must also play a role.

There are local authorities – including North Yorkshire, Leeds, York and Coventry - who are already exploring how to develop lasting connections for children that will stand them in good stead as they get older. These local authorities are placing greater emphasis on relational care throughout a child's journey through the care system.

### The children's social care service run by the City of York Council is embedding a new approach which prioritises long-term relational care for children.

**This strategy takes a lifelong perspective, encouraging every conversation and decision to consider the long-term impact on the child. Practitioners are encouraged to ask, 'Is it good enough for my child and my family?'.**

**The council has committed to developing lifelong foundations through secure local family networks. The aim is to support more children to return to their family or network when it is safe for them to do so and in line with their wishes, and to ensure that more children remain at home in their naturally connected communities.**

**The local authority is promoting this way of working across all partner agencies engaged in providing services for children, young people and their families in York. The approach has already resulted in fewer children in care and on child protection plans[35].**

At the same time, programmes such as Lifelong Links, which helps local authorities connect children in care with people who matter to them, offer a promising model that could be adopted into mainstream practice.

**Lifelong Links is a programme developed by the charity Family Rights Group, which aims to ensure that a child in care has a positive support network around them to help them during their time in care and into adulthood.**

**A trained independent Lifelong Links coordinator works with a child to find out who is important to them, who they would like to be back in touch with and who they would like to know. The coordinator searches for these people, using a variety of tools and techniques, and then brings them all together in a Lifelong Links family group conference to make a support plan with and for the child. This is then embedded in the child's care or pathway plan.**

**An evaluation of the Lifelong Links programme[36] found benefits for children as well as savings for the public purse due to increased placement stability and fewer children remaining in care.**

**As of December 2024, Family Rights Group has helped 42 local authorities to offer the Lifelong Links service, and over 3,400 children and young people have benefited from the approach[37].**

## The way forward

The socio-economic forces shaping the lives of Gen Z as they navigate the path to adulthood push us to re-examine how we close the gap between the life chances of young people who have been in care and their peers. For decades, policymakers have sought to address this disparity by incrementally extending the rights of care leavers. Even now, ministers are discussing offering them new benefits such as free prescriptions and bus passes[38].

Yet it is clear that incremental improvements in support for those leaving care will not be sufficient to transform their life chances. For example, at the current rate of progress, it would take 107 years to close the gap in the higher education rates of care-experienced young people and those outside the care system[39]. Instead, we must reconsider what it means to be 'in care' and re-evaluate whether it provides the foundation for adulthood. Given the importance of trusted, guiding relationships in supporting Gen Z's move towards independence, our care system needs to focus on helping children build life long relationships that will endure into adult life.

The role of the state – the corporate parent – must go beyond keeping children safe until they are deemed old enough to manage by themselves. It is time to radically rethink our responsibilities to children in care who otherwise risk being abandoned.

# About the author

## Lisa Harker

Lisa Harker is the Director of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO), an organisation dedicated to enhancing the lives of children and families by putting data and evidence at the heart of the family justice system. With more than 30 years of experience, she has been instrumental in shaping policy and practice to improve children's welfare. Lisa's previous roles include Director of Strategy at the NSPCC, Co-Director of the Institute for Public Policy Research, and as a government 'Child Poverty Tsar'.

# Endnotes

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6 The corporate parent duty currently rests with the local authority but the Government intends to extend this duty to other public bodies and government departments under measures proposed in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

7 These arrangements are called Staying Put in England, When I am Ready in Wales, and Continuing Care in Scotland.

8 The previous government made a commitment to expand support for young people leaving residential care (up to the age of 21) from 20 to 47 local authorities. This is less than one third of local authorities in England. The current government has committed to legislate to ensure all local authorities 'consider' whether care leavers up to the age of 25 require a package of support 'if their welfare requires it'.

9 Children looked after in England, including adoptions, DfE, November 2024. In the year to 31 March 2024 some 6,250 were living in independent, semi-independent or supported accommodation in England and an additional 3,790 children were living in 'other placements' which had not yet been registered as supported accommodation.

10 Looked after children aged 16 to 17 in independent or semi-independent placements, Reporting year 2022 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK; These statistics showed that 36% of 16 and 17 year olds in care were in these placements, but the statistics have not been updated since 2022. As shown above, as 10,040 children were living in independent, semi-independent or supported accommodation or in 'other placements' in the year to 31 March 2024 and there were 22,620 16 and 17 year olds were in care at this point, which suggests the proportion is likely to be higher than one in three. Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK.

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