



## Developing and Maintaining Relationships for Care-Experienced People

Roundtable Report

August 2021

The **Developing and Maintaining Relationships for Care-Experienced People Roundtable** brought together diverse voices from academic, lived-experienced, professional and policy making communities in the social care sector. The aim of this event was to stimulate discussion and to work towards identifying solutions on how to improve the relational experiences of children in care and those who have spent time in the care system through changing policy and practice.

### Executive Summary

- Our early relationships influence many aspects of our later life, and we all have a right and a need to connect with significant others, including parents, family and community, and to experience their sensitivity, actions and commitment. The social care system has a prime responsibility to ensure the relational needs of children and young people in care and care leavers of all ages are met to promote their safety and development, and to provide opportunities to maximise their capacity to fully engage in the world around them.
- There are numerous areas where the children's social care system needs development but also areas where it can provide important solutions in meeting the relational needs of children currently in care and care-experienced people. These include opportunities to learn about, explore, discuss, and address the impact of care-experienced people's personal histories on their well-being, welfare, and sense of identity. Experience of 'family for life' or meaningful connection whether with birth parents or wider birth family, or other forms of placement that provide a stable, loving family, with emotional, personal and social security a priority. This experience of family and relationships should extend beyond childhood and adolescence as it does for most children cared for by their parents.
- This roundtable report advises future consideration is given to a number of related areas: investing in innovative ways to support professionals to promote loving relational environments in their work with children in care and care-experienced people, considering relationship building as essential for meaningful participation, building towards relationships that last beyond formal care and recognising diverse pathways to relationship stability.

These themes are explained in more detail below.

### Starting Points

#### *A responsibility to connect*

Children are born with the instinctive capacity to reach out and connect with their caregivers. Where caregivers are able to respond sensitively to children's communications and needs, the child will develop a sense of trust and engagement with caregiving adults. It is the responsibility of parents, families, communities, and systems therefore to be sensitively responsive and focussed on the emotional well-being, physical safety and indeed survival of the child. Every child and individual has a need and a right to experience consistent sensitive responses. A secure and sensitive relational set of experiences will create a sense of safety and opportunity that enables further connections with the world around a child. Connection is vital for human survival and research using attachment models has demonstrated how essential early relationships are in children's lives. **It is the unequivocal responsibility of the social care system in its role as a 'corporate parent' to ensure the need for relationships that provides a sense of security is fulfilled for children and young people during their time in the care system and beyond.**

## *Relationships build futures*

Research and lived experience inform us that **early relationships have a profound influence on many aspects of our later life experiences**. Formative relationships affect an individual's sense of self, ability to regulate their emotions, feeling of personal value, sense of security, trust in the world and others, future relationships with services and other people, sense of autonomy, and many other domains. When people's relational needs are not met there can be profound human and societal consequences. **Issues such as addiction, economic hardship, social isolation and mental health difficulties can often be understood as arising from a culture of adversity in multiple forms.**

**We know that, for children who have experienced adversity in early relationships, receiving sensitive care in loving new relationships with extended family or in foster care, adoption or residential care can be life changing and support these children to go on to lead successful and fulfilling lives.** Those strengths that for most children are developed in infancy can be developed at any stage in childhood where the quality of the relationship environment supports it. Early intervention when children are at risk makes recovery more likely, but even in adolescence and early adulthood after children have formally left care, sensitive, committed relationships can build security and resilience.

## **Areas for Development**

### *Gaps in the conversations*

**Given what we know about the importance of early relationships, why are the impact of these relationships not discussed and explored more often with children in care or care-experienced people?** Children living in care and care-experienced people deserve timely, developmentally appropriate, sensitive support and education that allows them to explore their thoughts, feeling and actions resulting from their relational experiences. They should be given the opportunity to understand how their relational experiences affect them in different aspects of their lives and support to develop their own healthy, rich relational worlds. For some children or young people these conversations might be informal and come through trusted adults, such as appropriately supported carers or professionals. For others, professional psychological support may be helpful. It is essential that support is offered with an eye on future benefit to a young person not only based on their current presentation or level of distress. We know that the benefits of having these conversations and doing this work prevents future distress or crisis points throughout and after an individual's time in care.

### *Untold stories*

Understanding our own stories and past relationships allows us to build a foundation for future lives and relationships. Care-experienced people often have gaps in their knowledge of their own life stories due to experiences of disrupted care and a lack of people to hold these stories for them. It is the responsibility of children's social care to record children's stories in a way they will find helpful and meaningful. Life story-work is often undertaken with young children at points of transition to permanent new families, but the transition to adulthood is a key point in time, as they enter the worlds of work, romantic relationships and parenthood, when not only is it valuable to reflect on and learn from the full range of positive and negative relationship experiences, but young people are more likely to have the cognitive and emotional capacity to engage fully in the task. **Care-experienced people, at any time in their life, should be able to access support in understanding their life stories and exploring how this affects their lives currently.** This process should be made as straightforward and accessible as possible.

*What is success without relationships?*

**Ways of measuring success currently used in the social care system typically do not take relationships into account.** While measures of educational outcomes, training, employment, and placement stability through to 18 or 21 are important, they do not capture whether an individual's relational needs are being met. Placement stability, for example, is only of value if the caregiving relationships are meeting the child's need to be loved and supported in exploring their world. It is important that consideration is given both during and after an individual's time in the care system to thinking about how their relational lives are developing. The full range of relationships in the child's life should be on the agenda for review meetings and become a key part of working with and following-up care-leavers. Preparing for independence should be about interdependence, supporting and building relationship networks not preparing for isolation. To know the social care system is doing a good job of supporting children and young people's relational lives, we need to know whether children and young people feel they have supportive relationships during and after their time in care. It is critical that markers of success should not be set at the detriment of relationship forming. Professionals should not be put in positions where they have to prioritise administrative tasks that 'tick boxes' over time spent enabling and sustaining relationships in whatever way that is meaningful to the young person.

*Staying connected to communities*

We know that there are challenges for care-experienced people remaining connected to their communities both during and after their journey in the care system. For some children and young people, coming into state care means separating from cultural or geographical communities which may be personally important to them. This separation can be exacerbated by stigma surrounding the care system that is particularly prevalent in some communities. **How can we support care-experienced people to draw from the strengths of their communities of origin during their time in care while also building connections in new communities?** It is critical that work is done through a young person's time in care to support them in maintaining positive connections to communities of origin where this is safe, appropriate, and based on active engagement with and understanding of the child's wishes. Professionals should be provided with greater opportunity to engage with issues surrounding intersections between care and other community identities such as race, as exemplified in projects such as [The Black Care Experience](#). Innovative work has been done by organisations such as [Each and Every Child](#) to think about how reframing of care can be used to reduce stigma in communities. Furthermore, when this fits with their wishes, care-experienced people should be supported to join and develop new communities including with care-experienced peers.

## **Future Priorities**

*Supporting professionals to build relationships and be sensitively responsive*

**Professionals in the social care system need to be adequately supported to build meaningful relationships with children and young people in care.** There are many recognised barriers including high workloads, workplace pressures and resource shortages and sometimes concerns about professional boundaries that make it challenging for social care professionals to have the emotional and social space to engage with the individuals they work with. It is critical that there are dedicated spaces and protected time for professionals, including carers, to spend time building relationships and to feel empowered to show love in their work with the children and young people. Promising work from foster carer support programmes such as the [Reflective Fostering Study](#) and [Mockingbird Project](#) may provide innovative models for supporting professionals to do this relational work. It is also

important that core training for professionals prioritises development of the knowledge and skills needed to understand and meet the relational needs of children from infancy to adulthood.

### *Relationships and Participation*

The UN Convention for the Rights of the Child identifies the importance of children's participation in their experience of the child welfare system. It is important to note that **children's ability to genuinely participate in planning and decision making depends upon the relationships they have with those in the child welfare system**. Without a trusting and meaningful relationship, it is not possible to truly understand what a child or young person needs or wants or to represent their views. It is also important that children and young people in care have their views heard and prioritised where possible in decision making about their relationships including who they want to stay in touch with and how (e.g., previous carers, birth family or others). Genuine participation may be an opportunity to assess whether the social care system is meeting a child's relational needs.

### *Different routes to stability*

The importance of long-term secure and stable relationships while in care has been clearly identified in research and is evidenced by listening to the lived experience of those who have spent time living in care. The impact of instability, as with placement breakdowns, moving schools, losing contact with parents and wider family, friends and professionals cannot be underestimated. **Supporting carers and professionals to maintain relationships with the children and young people in their care is essential, but there are many different routes to stable and meaningful long-term relationships**. While placement stability is often prioritised, sometimes placement moves are necessary, and it is vital that means for young people to stay in touch with previous carers and professionals are considered and supported.

Programmes such as [Life Long Links](#) are innovative in demonstrating different ways of maintaining connections for care-experienced people. Rigidity in the system should never be a barrier to maintaining relationships – for example, the view that new placements will be disrupted by children remaining in contact with previous caregivers may be oversimplistic and harmful. More work needs to be done to understand how alternative models, such as kinship care and special guardianship, can allow for different models of stable relationships through a more diverse care offer. It is important that we recognise that it is not only the connections with a 'primary caregiver' that are important to protect and maintain. Stability relies on a network of consistent connections – with friends, teachers, family members, social work staff and others.

### *Building to last*

It is vital that relationships for care-experienced people are recognised as needing to last. **As in birth families, it should not simply be considered a success if a young person is in a stable placement from their entry into care until they become a care leaver at 18 or 21**. The social care system should plan for and encourage high quality relationships while in care that continue in some form, whether formal or informal into adulthood, whether this be with professionals, carers, or important figures in care-experienced people's lives. Care-experienced adults need to have trusted adults from their childhood who they can ask for advice, feel held in mind by and share their future achievements with. When we build policies in children's social care, we want them to reflect what our ambitions are for a 30-, 50-, 70- or 90-year-old care-experienced person's future.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, every child and young person in care and every care-experienced adult has a right to their relational world being developed, supported, and maintained. There are examples of excellent practice in promoting relationships at each stage of care and for care leavers, but there are also areas where the care system could benefit from exploring how best to promote these significant relationships. This report serves to highlight some key areas where we could do better and innovate in supporting care-experienced people to experience positive relationships that will help shape their futures. We hope this conversation continues to develop and that we can continue to shine a light on the vital importance and centrality of relationships as the heart of best practice and policy in social care work.

### **Participants**

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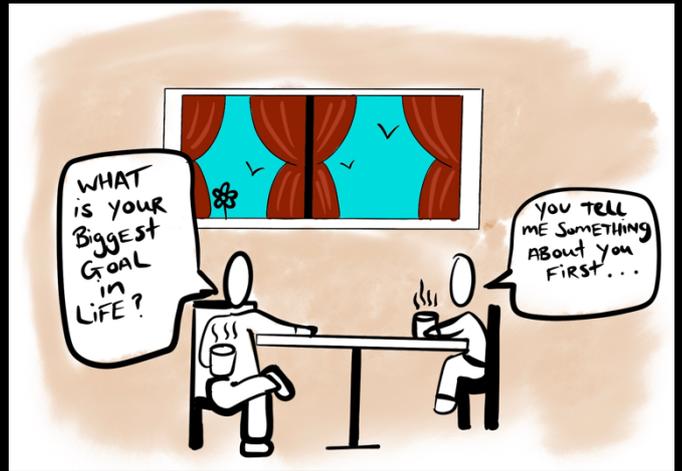
Jasmine Fisher (Care-Experienced Attendee from Become)

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This document was prepared under [Chatham House Rule](#) by [Eva A Sprecher](#) and [Dr John Simmonds OBE](#). Please contact Eva A Sprecher ([eva.sprecher.16@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:eva.sprecher.16@ucl.ac.uk)) with any questions or for further information. The running of this event was funded by [UCL Public Policy](#)'s Policy Engagement and Impact Fellowship awarded to Eva A Sprecher in Summer 2021.



Artwork inspired the roundtable theme by care-experienced artists Lauren Moore, David Grimm, Saira-Jayne Jones & Kasmira Kincaid