

A ChildLine Information Sheet

Children in care

“My mum is so messed up – I don’t even know how to get in touch with her any more. It’s so weird that I have a mother out there somewhere, but don’t even know where she is. It’s like being a boat lost out at sea.”
Antony, 14

What does being “in care” mean?

For a variety of reasons, some children and young people can’t live with their parents. When parents aren’t able to look after a child, the local authority has a legal responsibility to do so. It will find somewhere for the young person to live and someone to look after them. When this happens, the child is said to be “in care” or being “looked after”.

There are two main types of being in care. A child or young person may:

- be voluntarily living in a home run by a local authority or charity or a foster home, where the child’s parents agree to the child being looked after
- have been legally removed from the child’s family without the parents’ consent. This happens when a court feels that a child could be damaged by living at home and issues a Care Order. Approximately three out of every five children in care are under a Care Order.

Where do children and young people who are in care live?

In the past, most children in care lived in large residential care homes. Nowadays, more than two-thirds of the UK’s 78,500 looked after children live in foster homes (in a household with another family or carer). About one in eight live in residential care homes, which are now much smaller than they once were, usually housing less than ten children.

Why are children and young people in care?

According to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), less than two per cent of the children in care are there because of things they have done.

The vast majority have been removed from home because of problems their parents have. Most often, their parents have been physically or mentally unable to care for them or have been neglecting them.

Do children in care see their families?

In some cases children do not want to see their families. In other cases the courts have ruled that it is not safe for them to do so. But most young people do stay in touch with their families.

Do they go home?

Many young people go back to live with their families once things have been sorted out. Some of these will find themselves in care again. Children who do not return home stay with foster carers or live in children’s homes until they leave care at 16 or 18.

What do children and young people tell ChildLine about being in care?

“My mum was supposed to visit me today and she didn’t show up. She’s done it before – it’s so humiliating. I’m embarrassed: the staff told me not to get my hopes up and I did anyway.”
David, 16

Last year almost 2,000 children spoke to ChildLine about being in care; 150 of these called after having run away from foster care or a residential home. We heard from around 1,000 more children who said they were in care, but that this was not the reason they were calling. What ChildLine counsellors have learned from talking to thousands of looked after children each year is that children in care have all the same problems other young people do, plus lots of other issues to face. Some of the problems children in care call ChildLine about are: frequent moves, problems at

school, lack of control over their lives, and problems with their families and carers.

Frequent moves

"I've finally been placed with foster carers who I really get on with, but my social worker says I can only stay a few months then I have to move again. Why are they doing this to me?" Steve, 14

What if you came home today and someone told you that you had to pack up all your belongings and move to a place where you had no friends or family, and had to live with people you had never met? Now imagine that this was happening for the third time in less than a year. Many children in care move several times year, making it next to impossible to settle down, make friends and do well in school. According to government statistics, approximately one in six children in care has lived in three or more different homes in the last year.

Problems at school

"People at school take the mickey out of me for living in a care home. They call me a reject." Alison, 11

Children in care often suffer unexpected and prolonged absences from school, and then find it difficult to catch up after having moved. They also find that most schools aren't equipped to deal with the needs of children in care. They talk of the low expectations many schools have for them, and difficulties forming lasting relationships with adults and other children at the school.

Largely because of these problems, many children in care don't get as much out of education as they otherwise would:

- children in care are 13 times more likely than other pupils to be excluded from school
- while half of all young people achieve five or more good GCSEs, less than one in 12 children in care do so
- almost six in 10 children in care leave school with no qualifications at all
- only one per cent of children in care go to university.

Though these statistics are bleak, the Government has made the education

of looked after children a priority, and there is evidence that the situation is improving.

Lack of control over their lives

"I've been moved twice in the last year and always find it difficult to make friends quickly. Then, when I got here I really got on with this girl Wendy – but now they've moved her and no one will help me find out where." Fiona, 15

Many children in care say that they aren't consulted enough about the issues that affect their lives. They complain about a general lack of support, and say that the system seems to exist for itself, rather than for the children and young people it is supposed to take care of.

ChildLine hears from callers who say that they cannot confide in their carers or social workers, because they do not see them often enough, or because they are not taken seriously, or because the adults around them simply don't have enough time to listen. These young people tell us they feel isolated, excluded and powerless. Some children tell us about not being given enough money to buy clothes and other items that other children at school take for granted.

Problems with families and carers

"I know my foster mum loves my foster brother more than she does me. It hurts, but what can I expect – he's her own flesh and blood." Martin, 11

Many children in care have suffered through disturbing experiences, including neglect and physical and sexual abuse. Unable to return to their families, they must quickly adapt to life with people they have never met before.

Some callers to ChildLine tell us about the difficulties of living with foster carers. Some of these young people feel that they are seen as inferior to their carers' birth children, or believe that they are considered less trustworthy. Others may have trouble getting along with one or more members of the family, or have different religious beliefs from their carers. And many young people, having already had to leave their own families, are often anxious about having to leave another one. Young people in residential homes sometimes complain about the chaos of living with half a dozen other teenagers.

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Some speak of care home staff who are undertrained and unable to meet the needs of children in care. Others may be the victims of racist or sexist abuse.

What about adoption?

Most children in care are away from their families temporarily and are not considered for adoption. Forty per cent of looked after children in England, for instance, are in care for less than six months. Children who are adopted can continue to have some form of contact with their parents.

What happens when young people leave care?

"I'll be moving out of the care home soon, and I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm only 16. I'm not ready to live on my own."
Veronica, 16

More than 8,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 18 leave care each year. Because of problems with their families, many do not have the social support networks that other young people take for granted. Many care leavers have low levels of educational attainment, making it much harder to find good jobs. Care leavers often say they feel powerless and unprepared for their move into the 'real world'. They say that the system does not help them get ready for the obstacles they will face, but just cuts them loose.

Largely because of weaknesses in the system, care leavers suffer particular hardships:

- care leavers are more likely to be unemployed, and the Who Cares? Trust reports that many employers are biased against care leavers
- at least one in seven young women leave care pregnant or as a teenage mother.

In response to these problems, the Government has demanded that local authorities do more to help care leavers adjust to life after care. All care leavers must now have a Pathway Plan that runs at least until they are 21, covering education, training, career plans and housing issues. Because of these efforts, the situation for care leavers has improved over the last few years.

Fast facts about children in care

- There are approximately 78,500 looked after children in the UK.
- In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, approximately one in every 200 children is looked after by a local authority. In Scotland, the figure is one in every 100.
- Around two-thirds of children in care live in foster homes.
- Approximately 12 per cent of looked after children live in residential care homes.
- In England, 62 per cent of children in care are there because of abuse or neglect.
- Throughout the UK, 55 per cent of the children in care are boys.
- About 20 per cent of children in care are under five years old.
- In England, 81 per cent of children in care are white, eight per cent are of mixed race, seven per cent are black and two per cent are Asian. In the rest of the UK only a small percentage are non-white.
- A disproportionately high number of young people in care are disabled.
- Approximately 2,400 unaccompanied asylum seekers under the age of 16 are in care. 70 per cent of these are in London.
- Over a quarter of prisoners were in care as children.
- Between a quarter and a third of rough sleepers were in care.
- Young people in care are two-and-a-half times more likely to become teenage parents.
- Children of women in care are more than twice as likely to go into care themselves.

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Resources

ChildLine

The Line is ChildLine's special telephone helpline for children living away from home.
Tel: **0800 884444**

Voice

Voice works to empower children and young people in care and campaigns for improvements to their lives.

Tel: **0808 800 5792**

Email: info@voiceyp.org

Website: www.voiceyp.org

The Who Cares? Trust

The Who Cares Trust? gives children and adults information about residential and foster care.

Tel: **020 7251 3117**

Websites: www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

Who Cares? Scotland

Tel: **0141 226 4441**

Website: www.whocaresscotland.org

Children's Legal Centre

Legal advice and information about issues that affect young people.

Email: clc@essex.ac.uk

Website: www.childrenslegalcentre.com

British Association for Adoption and Fostering

Promotes the interests of children and young people separated from their families.

Tel: **020 7421 2600**

Website: www.baaf.org.uk

NYAS – National Youth Advocacy Service

NYAS provides advocates for children and young people in care.

Tel: **0800 616101**

Website: www.nyas.net

Sources for statistics used in this information sheet:

- *National Statistics Bulletin*, Department for Education and Skills: www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SBU/b000424/bulletin_06_03_final.pdf
- *Scottish Executive Statistics Online*: www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00287-00.asp
- *Social Services Statistics Wales*: www.lgdu-wales.gov.uk/eng/Project.asp?id= SX9F3B-A77F4BE2&Cat=23
- *Children Order Statistics*, Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Northern Ireland: www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/publications/2003/child01_02.pdf
- *Preventing Social Exclusion*, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001

ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC.

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Please note – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect young people's identities.

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CONTACTING CHILDLINE

Children can call ChildLine on **0800 1111** (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit www.childline.org.uk

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our telephone service on **0800 400 222**.
Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders' institutions called The Line on **0800 88 4444**.
Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 9.30pm
Saturday to Sunday 2.00pm to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call **020 7650 3230**.

