

Understanding why you are in care

bright spots insights

About Bright Spots

The Bright Spots Programme is a partnership between Coram Voice and the University of Oxford, funded by the Hadley Trust. It 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 wellbeing i.e. how children feel. Are they happy, safe and feel they are doing well?

By working with over 40 local authorities and gathering almost **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.

'Has someone explained to you why you are [or were] in care?' is a key question in the Bright Spots surveys because children and young people felt this was important. Our research reviews found that children often had outstanding questions and wanted help to understand why their family could not always give them safe or positive relationships.

Why do children need to understand why they are in care?

Every child and young person who comes into care needs to know why and have opportunities to discuss the reasons this happened whenever they feel unclear. Coming to an understanding about this life-changing event is the 'right' of every child or young person and fundamental to their development, identity and emotional well-being (Adshead, 2012; Adler, 2012; NICE, 2013). When this does not happen, it can lead children to feel insecure, unwanted, and responsible for being in care - factors that can have a severe negative impact on their self-worth and well-being (Staines and Selwyn, 2019).

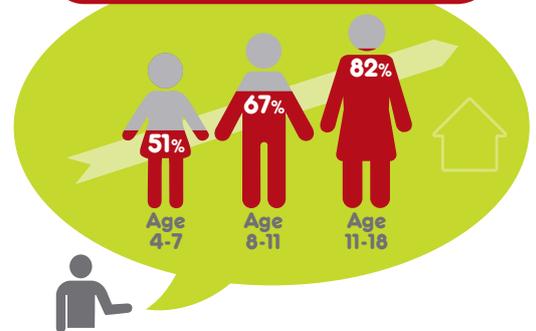
"I would like someone to talk to about my feelings and tell me about my past. I would like to see a picture of my dad, so I know what he looks like. I would like to see a picture of me as a baby. I have never seen a picture of me. I have a lot of questions that no-one answers."
(11-18yrs)

The Bright Spots national findings

Based on responses from our Bright Spots surveys with children in care and care leavers we found:

- Younger children (those aged 4 to 7) were more likely to be confused or unclear about why they were in care - half felt they hadn't had an explanation from an adult.
- Young people (aged 11-18) were more likely to feel they had received a satisfactory explanation but about a fifth were unsure or did not know. Boys were more likely to feel they knew enough.

Someone has fully explained why I am in care.



I don't know why I was in care or would like to know more.
Care leavers



- Analysis of the Bright Spots data showed that a lack of knowledge about the reasons for care was associated with feeling unsettled in placement and low subjective well-being for children in care (Staines and Selwyn, 2019).
- Young people who had left the care system continued to report that they had not had a full explanation about why they had been in care - nearly a quarter of care leavers (aged 18-25) surveyed through Bright Spots felt this way.

How can local authorities help children?

The importance of understanding who we are and where we come from is recognised in good social work practice, for example through undertaking life story work or other direct work (DfE, 2010: 173). Unlike adoption where a life story book must be produced there is no such mandate yet for children in foster or residential care.

Local authorities have a critical role in helping young people understand their background and what has happened both before, and during, their time in care.

But discussing these issues relies on the child having a good relationship with somebody they trust, who knows the child well and has the training and support to explore these issues in a child-centred way (Staines and Selwyn, 2019).

Our findings show the importance of professionals sharing with all children and young people age-appropriate accounts of why they are in care and the plans for maintaining relationships with the important people in their lives, including their brothers and sisters.

However, discussing with a child why they have become looked after can be a difficult conversation, especially when the child is very young and/or the reasons are distressing for the child and painful for the worker to convey. Children must understand that being in care is not their fault and they are not to blame.

Our Bright Spots research found variation between local authorities: in some areas a higher proportion of children reported that an adult had provided them with an explanation as to the reasons why they are in care. After getting their Bright Spots results and seeing what their children felt, some local authorities have focused on the issue of helping their children understand the reasons for being in care. This paper summarises some examples of practice.



Spotlight on East Riding

A larger proportion of **East Riding's** care leavers reported they had received a full explanation as to why they were in care compared to care leavers in other local authorities. One reason for this may be because the Pathway Planning process contains a specific question in the 'identity and interests' section which asks:

Do you have any questions about why you became looked after? The question acts as a trigger for discussions and is a prompt for leaving care workers to check with their young person every now and again whether they feel happy with the knowledge they have and to ask if there is any support they need with this area.

"Children separated from their birth families are often denied the opportunity to know about their past and to clarify past events in terms of the present. They may have changed families, social workers, homes and neighbourhoods. Their past may be lost, much of it even forgotten.

Losing track of the past can make it difficult for children to develop emotionally and socially. Life story work is an attempt to give back some of this past."

Ryan, T & Walker, R (2016)

"...I have asked why I was put into care, no one will tell me!!! I only have bad memories and therefore am left being very scared of my biological family and yet no one will/can help me..."

(Care Leaver)

"For me to understand why my adopting parents put me into care and why I cannot go home again to live with them."

(11-18yrs)

"I want to know a lot more stuff about my family – more photos."

(11-18yrs)

Spotlight on Southampton

The **Southampton** Bright Spots survey results showed that some children did not feel that an adult had explained to them why they were looked after. In response to hearing this Southampton have developed a new training workshop for social workers. The session is called '**Finding the Right Words**'. The aim is to help professionals to help children understand the reasons why they are in care. The training offers a '**reflective space to try out and work together on ways to communicate difficult experiences**'.

As part of the work a video has been made in partnership with a Southampton care leaver who shares the impact of not having a solid explanation of when he came into care and how he created his own narrative to manage this.

The feedback from the events has been positive though people wanted it to be longer (currently 3 hours long). The plan is to roll out the training to all frontline social workers in Southampton.

"I'd like to know more about why I'm in care. I'd like more contact with mum but still at the contact centre."

(8-11yrs)

"I would like to know more about why I am in care and why I am not living with my mum."

(4-7yrs)

"I don't know anything about my Dad - I don't know if he is very nice or not. I feel nervous and scared."

(11-18yrs)

Spotlight on North Somerset

North Somerset have been taking part in Bright Spots since the start of the programme and have carried out surveys with their children in care every year. The Bright Spots Programme helped them to identify that their children in care did not always feel they understood why they were in care. Like other local authorities this was particularly an issue for younger children (from age 4 up to age 11).

North Somerset has been busy working to improve their practice. They have developed a '**Me Guide**' that children are given towards the start of their placement. This is something their worker or carer can look at with the child to help them ask questions and learn more about what has happened to them.

In addition, since their early Bright Spots results they have made sure that every child in care has a life story booklet and a keepsake box. There is also now a '**welcome pack**' for children with information, resources and a memory stick for holding important documents and memories.

Because North Somerset regularly undertake the Bright Spots survey they have been able to see how the work they have done has led to improvements in their survey results in how their children are doing in relation to feeling an adult has explained to them why they are in care.

Read more here: <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2017/03/09/councils-social-worker-name-cards-helping-support-children/>

"For the child, having a clear understanding of why they are in care is an important step towards orienting and adjusting psychologically to the new set of circumstances. It helps the child redefine their relationships with self, parents and siblings now that they are living apart from them. This understanding is also important for promoting placement stability. How can a child be free to join another family and accept their rules, routines and rituals if they do not understand what was wrong with, or not working in, their birth family? How can they be free to experience a sense of belonging in the new family, even temporarily, if they are preoccupied with why they cannot live in their previous home?"

Coman et al. (2016) p.51

**"I have been told different things about why I am in care. My dad told me the reasons social services told him, but they told me differently."
(11-18yrs)**

**"I don't like it when my social worker talks to me about why I am in care."
(11-18yrs)**

Bright Spots: Key messages from children and young people

- Coming into care raises a range of feelings and not knowing why you can't live with your family can make things even more difficult.
- Adults should be open and honest about children and young people's past and plans for their care – giving consistent explanations and keeping children up to date with changes.
- Children and young people want help to keep personal information such as photos and family keepsakes safe.
- Don't assume that children and young people are unable to understand, but use age appropriate ways of talking about difficult experiences.
- Don't let fear of upsetting children and young people lead to important information being kept from them.
- Life story work is a core opportunity to explore, understand and make sense of the past and the present. It should be offered to children with an option of opting out if the time is not right for them.
- Ask children and young people what they would like to discuss and whether they want to discuss it
- Give different opportunities to ask questions about what has happened and repeat information as often as needed.
- Support access to care files as they can help older young people answer questions and fill gaps in their lives.

Any questions about this insight paper or the work of Bright Spots Programme then get in touch

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Resources

Ryan, T. & Walker, R. (2016) *Life Story Work: Why, What, How and When* **Coram BAAF**

<https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/life-story-work>

Hammond, S. & Cooper, N. (2013) *Digital Life Story Work* **Coram BAAF**

<https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/digital-life-story-work>

Trove project

A digital and physical memory box for looked after children developed by University of Bristol and Studio Meineck
<http://helloimtrove.com/>

MIRRA (Memory, Identity, Rights in Records, Access) project
<https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/sample-page/>

Life story work tools

<http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/life-story-book-templates-examples/>

US model of Life Story Work

<http://darlahenry.org/model-overview/>

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/>

- Staines J and Selwyn J (in press) "I wish someone would explain why I am in care": the impact of children and young people's lack of understanding of why they are in out-of-home care on their well-being and felt security. *Child and Family Social Work*
- Care leavers' views on their transition to adulthood: a rapid review of evidence (2017)
- Children and Young People's Views on Being in Care (2015)
- Our Lives, Our Care: Looked after children's views on their well-being in 2018 (November 2018)
- Our Lives Beyond Care: Care leavers' views on their well-being in 2018 (April 2019)

Other References

Adshead, G. (2012) *Their dark materials: narratives and recovery in forensic practice*. Royal College of Psychiatrists Publication Archives

Adler, J. M. (2012) Living into the story: agency and coherence in a longitudinal study of narrative identity development and mental health over the course of psychotherapy. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(2), 367.

Coman, W., Dickson, S., McGill, L. and Rainey, M. (2016) Why am I in care? A model for communicating with children about entry to care that promotes psychological safety and adjustment, *Adoption & Fostering*, 40, 1, 49-59

Department for Education (2010) *Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review*

NICE (2013) *Looked after children Quality Standard* (QS 31)

**"They call it life story work... but they don't really do it. I have a memory box, but I want information and facts... To know more about how I came into care. I think I should have been told years ago."
(11-18yrs)**