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# Celebrating success: what helps looked after children succeed

Helen Happer, Joanna McCreadie and Jane Aldgate

commissioned for the review of looked after children in Scotland



social work  
inspection agency

# Celebrating success: what helps looked after children succeed

Helen Happer, Joanna McCreadie and Jane Aldgate

Edinburgh, 2006

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# Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank all the local authorities and voluntary organisations which helped us to contact the adults and young people in the study. Managers and workers went out of their way to arrange meetings and facilitate the interviews. People in these organisations warmly welcomed the opportunity for looked after young people and adults to talk about their success.

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# 1 Introduction

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We recognise that outcomes for children who are looked after by local authorities in Scotland have long been a source of concern. There is a significant body of research on the difficulties and failures that looked after children experience. There is relatively little research on looked after children that has a focus on good outcomes. Reports in the Scottish media on looked after children frequently focus on this group as a problem and we hear little about looked after children who are living ordinary lives and are happy and successful. As one participant said:

There's never anything in the press about people such as myself having a nice time in care. It's always about that young person that got beaten up and tortured. It's always bad publicity in the papers and the news ... it's just nonsense. (Fraser)

Publicity about poor outcomes tempts us to think that the care system in Scotland is failing, and failing miserably. But what of the looked after children who become successful? How much do we know of the characteristics and circumstances of those children whose experience of being looked after has been positive and life enhancing? What factors contributed to their eventual happiness and success? What can we learn from their experience which we could use to improve how we care for looked after children, now and in the future?

Rather than continuing to identify and analyse difficulties and failure, we wanted to learn more about looked after children who succeed. We know from research that children's futures are not necessarily fixed by their past. Becoming looked after is an opportunity for the direction and pathway of a child's life to change. Our main aim therefore was, to understand, from people who have been looked after, what helped them become and feel successful.

We had a number of objectives:

- to find out what helped this group of children grow into successful adults
- to inform people who care for looked after children about what helps and what makes a difference to the futures of looked after children
- to publicly recognise and celebrate the success of looked after children

We interviewed 30 adults and young people who had been looked after or who were moving towards independence having been looked after. We also spoke with the carers and professionals of another two individual participants. The methodology of the study is described in Appendix 1. We asked individual participants to tell us their stories of being looked after and what helped them achieve the success they experienced in their lives. We also asked participants about what they thought should change in how children are looked after. In addition to these individual accounts, we discussed the need for change in detail with two groups of young people who had recently become independent after being looked after, and we have included this in the chapter on what participants want to change. We prepared two criteria that defined different kinds of success. These were that:

- participants are demonstrably able to make and sustain meaningful relationships
- participants are engaged in some kind of work, education, training or meaningful activity

Agreeing these two indicators of success was not straightforward. We wanted the indicators to reflect the positive developmental ideas that we discuss in this study in the later chapters. We decided against a narrower focus, for example on academic achievement, as we wanted to be inclusive of the different kinds of success that are important to all children.

This approach let us include young people like Alison (14), who has learning difficulties and has recently moved from a specialist school to a school in the local town. Alison thinks this is a huge achievement and everyone who knows her agrees. She told us:

Being more independent is probably the biggest thing ever and going to my new school is something quite incredible for me to do. I've grown up a lot.



We believe that policy makers, politicians, leaders, managers and the people who directly care for looked after children can learn from children and young people themselves. Increasingly, children are being seen as active participants who directly shape their lives and able to contribute effectively to the world around them (Moss 2002). We have therefore included in this study the stories of the participants themselves and where appropriate, their actual words. Some of the participants were happy to be identified. They were proud of their successes and did not mind people knowing their histories. Others did not want to be identified to a wider audience as looked after children. A number of the stories also had the potential to identify other family members who had not agreed to be part of the study. For these reasons, we have anonymised all the participants by giving them different names, removing some details from their stories that we thought might make them identifiable and summarising some of their life stories. The age we give for participants is their age in 2005, when this study took place. The stories and words we include here are powerful examples of just what the participants have achieved, and they remind us of the potential of all our looked after children.

This study focuses on a small selected group of people who were looked after. While we can learn from their experiences, we cannot assume that replicating their experiences would automatically lead to improved outcomes for every other child.

The participants told us about what did make a difference to them and we think that this, together with our analysis, can guide practice in working with looked after children and young people.

From our interviews with participants, five factors emerged as critical to their success:

- having people who care about you
- experiencing stability
- being given high expectations
- receiving encouragement and support
- being able to participate and achieve

The impact on participants' lives of their relationships with others dominated their views. Being successful was strongly influenced by the behaviour and attitudes of others but also depended on the attitudes and actions of the participants themselves.

The next chapter describes the group of participants and their experiences. The following five chapters follow the factors that were identified as critical to participants success. The eighth chapter describes the participants' views of what should change for looked after children. The final chapter sets out the conclusions of the study.

## 2 The participants

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We wanted to hear from those who had been looked after about what they thought had helped them most. Those with first hand experience of being looked after have a unique perspective. We wanted to hear about their ideas for changes that could improve outcomes for looked after children and young people in Scotland. Not least, we wanted to bring their stories to a wider audience, and to challenge the thinking that difficult early experiences automatically and inevitably lead to a troubled future.

There were 32 participants in the study – 16 male and 16 female. On the basis that there should be evidence of success and positive change over time, the study was deliberately weighted towards adults and older young people. We hoped that age and distance would bring an important sense of perspective to our participants' views.

Thirty of the participants were 16 years or older. Of these, 17 were between 16 and 21 years and 13 between 22 and 46 years. Only two participants were aged less than 16 years and had been nominated for the study because of the particularly positive changes in their lives.

### **Ethnic origin**

Two participants were of mixed ethnic origin, 30 were white British. For all participants, English was their first language.

### **Disability**

Five participants had a disability which had a significant impact on their day to day lives.

## **Experience of being looked after**

The participants had been looked after by a number of different authorities from across Scotland (14 in total) including major cities, small towns and rural areas. None were from island communities. All of the participants had been looked after and accommodated away from home. Several had also had the experience of being looked after at home on a supervision order at some point before being accommodated. It was difficult to be completely accurate on this as we were reliant on participants' memories and knowledge of legal orders. At the time of the study, seven of the participants still had looked after status; ten were compulsorily or discretionarily supported by a local authority and 15 no longer had a formal relationship with a local authority.

Although these 15 participants no longer had a formal relationship with the local authority, ten had maintained links in some form. Three were still living with, or were very closely supported by a foster carer, although payments were no longer made by the local authority. A further three participants had retained significant links with foster carers or residential care staff, which they felt was a source of support for them. Four had retained links with their social workers, although in some cases the social worker had changed job or had retired from work altogether.

## **Participants' stories of being looked after**

The stories and words in the celebrating success study are from the biographies of the participants that they gave us in their interviews. These stories and words represent their experiences, as they remembered and told us. We found that not all participants were confident they had accurate information about all of the reasons which had led them to become looked after. All, however, had a reasonable grasp of their background and had been given an explanation which fitted with their experience. Many participants were able to describe in great detail their lives before they became looked after. A number of people talked about how adults, carers and/or social workers had helped them to make sense of events in their lives through life story work or similar direct work.

With two exceptions, participants who had spent periods of time in the care of friends or extended family were unsure whether these were informal arrangements made between

family members, or whether the social work department had agreed and supported these arrangements in some way. Some participants knew that they had been looked after at home on a supervision order before becoming accommodated. Others spoke of social work involvement in their families but were unsure about the legal basis for this.

### **Length of time participants were looked after**

As participants were sometimes unsure about their legal status, we also used the threshold of going away from home and being accommodated to explore how long participants were looked after. This was done by asking participants how old they were when they became looked after away from home.

Two participants had become looked after before the age of two; 13 became looked after between the ages of two and ten; 12 between the ages of 11 and 14 and the remaining five became looked after when they were 14 or 15 years old.

More than two thirds of the participants had been looked after away from home for longer than five years. There was a fairly even range of time spent looked after away from home up to the longest period, which was 15 years. Three of the participants had been accommodated for a period of one year or less. One of these was still being looked after at the time of the study and had a fairly lengthy relationship with the social work department, having been placed on supervision at home for two years before moving to a residential unit.

### **Why participants became looked after**

We asked participants to tell us why they thought they had been looked after. For some people, a range of factors had combined to make it impossible for them to stay with their birth families. Some people gave more than one reason. Other studies (Packman and Hall 1998) have noted that children commonly become looked after following a series of interrelated events, rather than for a single reason.

Neglect had contributed to becoming looked after for nearly half of the participants in the study. These participants described a chaotic and neglectful background, where the general standard of care had been low and parents had been unable to care consistently or

adequately for their children. Often, this was associated with alcohol abuse by one or both parents. Five participants told us about parents misusing drugs.

Five participants spoke of a parent with a serious mental health problem, and this was sometimes associated with alcohol misuse.

A third of participants had become looked after following the serious illness or death of a parent, or because bereavement or divorce had left a remaining parent unable to cope. A common picture was of a family which was managing until an event meant a crucial support was lost. An incident such as parents separating or the death of a grandparent could tip a family into crisis. A number of participants in the study described a period of increasing neglect. Often children in the family were having to fend more and more for themselves and care for younger siblings. Three participants told us that, with hindsight, they recognised that they had been behaving in such a way as to put themselves at risk. This included one young person who said she had been spending nights away from home with older friends and had been at risk of sexual exploitation.

Five participants told us they had experienced physical and/or sexual abuse.

Nine participants described having lived in a situation of domestic violence. In only one case was this directly responsible for children having to leave the family home.

While several people described having been in trouble with the police in the past, only one gave being arrested for a serious offence as the reason for his removal from home.

### **Where participants lived when they were looked after**

Of the 32 participants, four had spent significant periods of time in more than one kind of care setting. This usually included both residential and foster care. This added up to a total of 21 experiences of foster care and 15 of residential settings. The latter included ten experiences of children's homes or young people's units, two experiences of residential schools and two of secure units. One participant had been placed in a facility for young people experiencing serious mental health problems.

The group of participants had a substantial and varied experience of being looked after and accommodated. They had childhood experiences of loss, adversity and abuse. However, following these experiences they were able to become successful adults. Participants most often talked about the contribution that people who cared about them made to their success. We go on in the next chapter to discuss participants' experience of people who cared about them, and their feelings about these relationships.

## 3 Having people who care about you

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Twenty three of the 32 participants, when asked what helped them to be successful, immediately identified a person who cared about them:

My foster carers trust me, and they love me like I was their own daughter. (Tanya)

For many participants, there were several people who cared whose influence had been critical. People who cared provided support that was tangible to children and young people. It was expressed through their attitudes and their actions. Participants described adults who provided them with positive parenting and meaningful childhood experiences:

We were always involved...going along with my foster mother to dances and stuff like that which was actually great fun and a big treat ... and there were holidays ... it was a family situation. (Shona)

The people who cared for the participants were found in different contexts and in different roles. Most participants identified foster carers and residential staff as key people. Seven identified their social worker as having been particularly influential or helpful. Five specifically mentioned the support they had received from throughcare and aftercare services. Three participants had received services from voluntary organisations which they judged had made a very significant difference to the course of their lives. Several of the participants spoke of their positive experiences at school and helpful teachers, with one young person mentioning a guidance teacher as the most helpful person she had encountered. Another participant named the local authority children's rights worker as the most consistent professional person in her life and someone who she felt had contributed to her achievements.



Toni went to so many different schools that she couldn't remember them all. When she moved to secondary school, she began to miss school, until she was hardly attending. Her mother had problems with substance misuse and was unable to help her get to school or give her the parenting she needed. Toni asked a children's panel to find her a place in residential care, where she was living when we met her. She was going to school every day and was working towards seven standard grades. She talked about the importance of her key worker and the team of people who looked after her in residential care:

They've actually been alright here, made me feel safe, just helped me, because if I wasn't here I would just be running about with my pals outside and getting into trouble – that's no good for me. It feels like a family, because they all treat you the same.

Analysis of the discussion with participants about people that cared suggested that there were four important aspects to these relationships. These were:

- feelings of attachment between the child and the adults
- feelings of warmth, safety and being nurtured
- feelings of belonging and being included
- feelings of being trusted and trusting others

## **Feelings of attachment**

Attachment to significant adults is important for all children. For looked after children, who may have already experienced adults who are unable to give consistent care or provide parenting that meets their needs, positive attachment is particularly important.

Claire was 16 when she took part in the study. She had been living with her current foster carers since she was 11 and said:

From when I first came here I enjoyed it. It was like the atmosphere in the place. They were really nice to us.

Before this placement Claire had moved between her mother, who had a drink problem, and foster carers and could not remember all her placements or how many there were.

Moving between foster carers and her mother's care meant Claire had been to a lot of different schools, before moving to her current foster carers.

We know that it is possible for children to recover from separation from their family when they receive continuing and sensitive care (Aldgate 1990). Research on attachment suggests that children are able to develop new attachments, and in fact will be able to have many different attachments while they are growing up (Fahlberg 1991). We now know that patterns of attachment are not fixed and permanent for children. These patterns can change. Children and adults can also change the way they have learned to see others.

The way children's attachment needs are met will affect how they see the world around them and how much they trust and turn to others for support. One participant talked about how his foster carers treatment of him affected his feelings and behaviour:

I've got a good relationship with them – they treat me like their own child so I return it, you know? (Ross)

How children are able to manage and return feelings of attachment is important because learned patterns of attachment and trust are likely to affect an individual's ability to sustain relationships in adult life. Positive experience of attachment helps promote positive relationships in adult life. In addition, positive sustained relationships with others can be a factor in promoting success in adulthood (Rutter and Quinton 1984).

Participants in the study gave several examples of how they had been able to make new and lasting attachments to carers because of the sensitive and affectionate care they had received.

Daniel is a young boy with physical disabilities, and has limited communication skills. We met with Daniel, his foster carers, Simon and Anne, and their daughter Celia. Daniel was moved to foster care as his own parents were not able to care for him. Before living with his current foster carers, he had been with another set of foster carers and in respite care. Since being placed with Simon and Anne, Daniel's health has improved, as has his emotional and physical development. Those working with Daniel think that his significant

progress is due to the quality of care he now has, along with a strong bond with his foster carers. Anne said:

He's one of our own, always has been and always will be.

This attachment also included Celia, who talked about her experience of friends at school suggesting Daniel was not her real brother. She told us:

He feels like a proper brother and always will be.

Many participants described the people who gave them direct care (foster carers or residential workers) as being their family, or like a family:

They treat you like part of the family. They're like parents, basically – substitute parents, good parents. You can speak to them about anything. (Ross)

## **Feeling trusted and trusting others**

Participants said that knowing that someone genuinely cared about them was the most important factor in helping them regain a sense of trust.

Liam was 17 when we met him and was at college full-time, where he was studying for an HNC in social care. He also works part-time as a DJ, which he really enjoys. Liam was successful at school and achieved eight standard grades before going to college. Liam had been looked after since he was three, and had three foster care placements. Liam thought that the foster carers he was now living with were the best he had and said living there felt:

Like my own home.

Liam told us about his experience in a previous foster care placement, when he had been treated differently to the other children in the family. He contrasted this with his current foster carers, who had happily given him keys to the house.

Participants told us about how being shown trust by an adult gave them a message of confidence and optimism and boosted their self-esteem. Over time, provided the adult was skilled enough to go at the young person's pace and not to expect more than they were

able to give at that time, this had a very positive impact on a young person's attitudes and behaviour.

I think the most folk need is trust. If you can see that somebody trusts you it makes you feel happier, it makes you feel as though you want to get it right in your life. It makes you want to get your life sorted out and basically get on with it. (Darren)

## **Feelings of warmth, safety and being nurtured**

Before they had become looked after, many of the participants had lived in environments where they had experienced poor parenting. In these earlier experiences, participants described poor physical environment, a lack of emotional care and other difficulties. This contrasted with participants' experience of being looked after, like Carrie, who described the contrast between her neglectful home life, and her experience in the children's unit to which she moved when she was 13:

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.

This experience, of a marked change in the quality of life and care when being looked after, has been found in other studies, for example Aldgate and McIntosh (2006). Participants talked positively about their experience of this kind of change and the impact it had on their life:

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. (Fraser)

Several participants had stayed with their foster carers long-term and had become integrated into their families. The sense of belonging that emanated from these long-term relationships was one of the factors that promoted confidence and self-esteem. The participants learned that they were wanted and that they, in turn, had the ability to fit into

the family or home in which they had been placed. These attachments often lasted into adulthood, as Matthew told us:

I'm still with our foster parents because although they're our foster parents, they are our folks.

## **Feeling included and a sense of belonging**

The issue of feeling included or excluded was particularly important. Participants were very conscious of their different status within the family as a looked after child and had been very alert to being treated differently from the 'own' children:

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. (Fraser)

Those living with foster carers who had children of their own spoke most affectingly of this. Feeling included and not 'different' was extremely important to them:

They don't leave you out or nothing ... you feel like you are part of the family. They just treat us the way they treat their own son. (Liam)

Being accepted by the foster carers' whole family was also seen as very important by a number of participants. Participants talked of how sharing a room with the foster family's own children made them feel welcome and part of the family. Certainly acceptance by everyone in the household was very important to participants as a sign of their inclusive status:

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. (Jennifer)

Contact with foster carers extended family was no less important. It was seen as a sign of belonging, providing attachments across generations and access to experiences which were seen as enriching. Several participants talked about the importance of this:

It's been a natural family environment where I've always had the support of parents and I've always had the backing of, say, aunties and uncles. (Fraser)

My foster sister, who's the same age as me, she's actually got a daughter and when I see them, whenever I see my nieces and nephews it's like 'uncle Liam' and it's cool. (Liam)

In some cases, especially where children had spent most of their childhood in a foster carer's family, it was clear that bonds of attachment and caring relationships had developed over time between child and carers. Participants described how this bond manifested itself through feelings of belonging to their new family, feelings which were clearly reciprocated by the foster family accepting the child and making them feel loved. In some cases, the relationship became as if this had always been the child's family, and participants talked about how their carers were their real family:

I would class them as my substitute family, if you know what I mean. I would rather fall back on my foster carers, than I would my own family. (Luke)

Some participants continued to live with, or remain strongly connected to, their foster families long after they had stopped being looked after. Foster carers continued to be committed to children when they grew up.

Ross was 16 when we met him. He was studying for his highers, and had already passed eight standard grades, getting excellent results. He has lots of friends and a steady girlfriend. Ross gets on really well with his foster carers and said:

I look on them as my family so I can treat them as a mum and dad.

Ross became looked after when his mother was unable to care for him properly because of her alcoholism. He first lived with foster carers for respite when he was three months old. He has now been living full-time with foster carers since he was nine, having two longer term placements, one for two and a half years and one for four and a half years. Ross plans to go to university and join the forces. He is confident in his ambitions and wants to do well for himself, and the people who care about him. His foster carers plan to foster more children but have chosen to add an extension onto their house so that they will still have space for Ross for as long as he needs it.

We also found that the strength of attachment between the child and their carers could bring tension and worry as the child grew up. One participant told us about her concern

that she would have to leave her foster carers where she was very happy before she was ready to. The foster carers shared this concern. In most ordinary families, children are not expected to leave home until they are ready to do so and both parents and child are confident that moving away from home will be successful. We discuss arrangements for supporting young people leaving care (throughcare and aftercare) in more detail later in this report.

It might be thought that it is easier to create a sense of belonging in foster care, which more closely replicates an ordinary family setting, than it is in residential care. However, we met a number of participants who had experienced feeling accepted, secure and a sense of belonging in residential care. In the best experiences, participants thought of their residential carers as a kind of family.

The home that I was in, it was just a giant family. (Thomas)

What often characterised the positive relationships in residential care was the continuing sense of security and safety, which could be relied upon. Sometimes this was found in an individual member of staff.

Theresa told us about her experience of this. She was 34 years old at the time of the study and works as a social worker with a local authority. Theresa was separated from her younger brothers and went to live in residential care, where she was moved around a number of times. She formed a close relationship with one member of staff in residential care who gave her a lot of practical and emotional support. Theresa thought this to have been an extremely important relationship which has continued to the present day, and has provided an anchor in times of stress:

During all of my times of homelessness and all of my times of adverse circumstances, she has been the mainstay of my life and without her I wouldn't be here.

Some participants placed emphasis on the ethos of the home and the reliability of the staff:

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. (Darren)

At least one participant, having experienced both foster care and residential care, preferred living in residential care. The residential care team offered good parenting without making him feel different from other children or an outsider:

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. (Thomas)

The positive feelings that participants had about their carers and other stable adults in their lives had, in their views contributed to their success. They added and reinforced confidence and self-belief to children as they grew into adults. A number of participants had experienced these close positive attachments over an extended period of time. Others who had experienced a higher number of placements talked about their eventual long-term placement as very influential. Those who had continued to move around in care were of the clear view that this was not good for them, or for any children.



## 4 Experiencing stability

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Research findings showing that frequent moves in care are damaging for children date back a number of years (Jackson and Thomas 2000). Despite this, many young people who are looked after by local authorities experience numerous changes of placement. In 2004, 30% of looked after children in Scotland had three or more moves (Children's Social Work Statistics, Scottish Executive 2004). In this study, participants appeared to have experienced fewer moves, and therefore greater stability, than is generally the case for looked after children. Twenty five per cent of the participants had three or more moves. However, comparing the participants in the study to the Scottish average must be done with caution. The study had small numbers and participants were self-selecting, in the sense that they opted to be part of the study. Whether the number of moves had a direct impact on the outcomes for the participants is difficult to state definitively. What is clear from analysis of the interviews is that participants thought stability was an important factor in their success:

There was a constancy once I got put into care ... I've had the same team behind me in social work and I've had the same placement for 10 years. (Fraser)

Stability is universally seen as a desirable goal in relation to looked after children, because staying in the same place allows children to recover from separation and adverse experiences and it provides them with the opportunity to make new attachments. If they are of school age, it will probably allow them to progress at the same school, make friends and join in neighbourhood activities. In short, stability gives children the opportunity to learn, to feel they belong to someone and to be nurtured. When children cannot have stability in the place where they live, it is important for them to have consistency as far as possible (Jackson and Thomas 2000). In these situations, maintaining the same school and social worker, being able to see old friends, taking part in familiar activities, and keeping in touch with family members, are all extremely important.

There are many reasons why children change placements. There can be changes to the child and family's circumstances, or changes to the foster carers' circumstances that precipitate a move for a looked after child. Studies of foster care breakdown have suggested that factors such as children's histories and behaviour, parental contact, other children and events in the foster family and lack of social work support may all contribute to placement breakdown (Sinclair 2005).

Experience of placement breakdown varied considerably in the participants in our study. Ten participants had lived in one care placement and it might be assumed that they had not experienced the disruption in their lives that placement breakdown brings. However, of these ten, six had already moved from home to live with extended family or friends prior to becoming accommodated.

Fourteen participants had lived in two or three different care placements. Eight participants said they had experienced three or more placements. Some found it difficult to be completely accurate. From the interviews it was striking that some people could not remember how many places they had lived in. This was especially so either where participants had been very young when they first became looked after, or where a chaotic home life involved several changes of address, or where extended family and friends had provided care. There were two participants who were certain they had made more than a dozen moves.

The participants who had experienced many changes of placement were united in thinking this was unhelpful to them. They seemed to prize stability as very important. They saw moves and changes of placement as putting them on their guard about committing themselves to trusting relationships. Ian (16) had lived with several different foster carers, which had affected his view of stability:

Until I came here I didn't trust nobody, 'cos I kept thinking I was going to get moved again.

Even where participants thought a move had been good because it took them to a placement where they were happy, there was a feeling that children were moved too readily. Even one move can have devastating effects if the young person does not understand the reasons and is left guilty and confused.

Siobhan was 31 years old when we met her to talk about her experiences of being looked after. After finishing college and working as a secretary, she married and now has two young children. Siobhan first became looked after when she was four years old, following her parents' divorce and ill treatment from her stepmother. Though apparently settled with foster carers, Siobhan found herself suddenly moved to a residential unit after nine years, with no clear explanation. She feels this disruption, and the lack of any satisfactory resolution, has profoundly affected her over the years:

Afterwards, when I saw my foster parents they said they were sorry but they never gave a reason. My social worker just said it was a breakdown in relationships. You know, you have all these questions but nobody's got any answers. (Siobhan)

Frequent moves in and out of care, between home and foster carers, was felt to be equally disruptive:

I was always going back to my mum's then into care, then back to my mum's then into care again. (Claire)

Some of the participants thought that moves affected their school work, and consequently their ability to achieve in school:

I've had to move school quite a lot, make new friends and that. All the schools do the work in a different way so that's been hard, having to catch up all the time. (Claire)

Two participants had experienced periods of respite care, where a foster carer and parent or grandparent had shared their care for a period. For both, this had been experienced as helpful and positive:

For about 3 months I stayed with my gran part-time and my carer the rest of the week. It was quite a good idea 'cos it gave my gran a bit of a break and it gave me a break too. (Natalie)

## **Familiar routines**

Routines that might have been new to begin with became familiar over time and seemed to be critical to developing a sense of security, particularly to those whose home life had been chaotic. Getting up at the same time, having regular meals and being in a consistent environment was invaluable:

You'd come out your bed, you'd go downstairs for your breakfast at half past eight, which was another good thing for me, the routine, something that I'd never ever had before. (Tara)

Many participants compared their earlier experiences with their family to their experience in a care placement:

There was more of a routine. At home there was no routine at all. I mean, you just dragged yourself out of bed and went to school, no breakfast or anything. In care ... you got up and had a wash and you got dressed, your clothes were pressed for you and everything. And it was clean. Everything was perfect almost. You got pocket money. It was only 50p or something but still ... yeah, it was different and it was good. (Colin)

Participants who were now adults, particularly those who had children of their own, placed a high value on routines and the consistency they brought:

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. (Shona)

## **Contact with parents, siblings and relatives**

However much the stability and routine of a care placement meets the needs of a looked after child, they also need (whenever possible and appropriate) reliable contact with their own family. A major issue for all looked after children is the relationship they have with their own families. The significance to children of their families is reflected in policy and practice guidance which notes that contact between looked after children and their families should

be promoted, unless it is considered not to be in the child's interests (SWSG, Scottish Executive 1997). This view stems from theories about the importance for children of their attachments to their parents, even if they have been maltreated by them (Howe 2001).

Exploration of children's relationships with their parents was not a primary focus of the study but we were interested in whether participants had contact with their parents, siblings and relatives, and what the influence of these people had been in their lives. Often participants spontaneously introduced the subject of their own family to the interview. This was clearly an important issue, whatever the quality of the relationships, to many of the participants.

None of the participants we interviewed were living with their birth parents. Some had contact, others had none. Mike was placed in a children's home with his brother and sister after his parents separated in the early 1960s. His father maintained regular contact with them in the home and lobbied to have the children returned to his care. Mike told us that the knowledge that he was wanted by his father has made a real difference to the man he is today:

I've never doubted that he really wanted and loved us, though he wasn't the kind of man to ever have said so out loud.

Only one other participant specifically mentioned family members as positively contributing to their success. In contrast to these two positive experiences of contact with family, there were accounts of the impact of separation, especially from siblings, which had affected a small number of participants. Some spoke of their distress at the separation and spoke about being separated from siblings and the long-term impact.

Glenn was 17, and when we met him, had just been accepted for the army. He was proud of having done well in his initial training and was looking forward to his career in the army. Glenn also had his own local authority tenancy and was planning to buy this eventually. Glenn described himself as feeling:

Safe, secure and stable. I know what I am going for and I feel I can do it. Everything has calmed down. I'm quite happy. It is nicer than where I used to live. I think I've come quite a long way.

Glenn's current stability and ambitions contrasted with his earlier experiences. After a period in foster care he had been adopted. When his adoptive parents' marriage broke down, he

was separated from his siblings and went on to experience a number of different foster care placements.

Being separated from brothers and sisters was a painful and difficult issue for some participants. Claire, Ross and Mike all talked about how being able to stay with siblings made them feel more secure. However Theresa's younger brothers were placed elsewhere, and she had little contact with them as they grew up. This was all the more painful as she had been responsible for much of their care while their parents were drinking, and therefore she lost an important role and sense of being needed. Theresa felt that the loss she experienced was not recognised by her social worker or the staff in her residential unit, and that she was not given appropriate help to come to terms with this:

I grieved for my wee brothers. I still grieve for my wee brothers. I mean my wee brother is 22 but I still haven't got over the loss.

Some reported they were still upset by being apart from their siblings. Their views are similar to those reported by kinship care children in Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) study of kinship care. The kinship children missed their siblings as much as their parents. This applied as much to step siblings as it did to those siblings with whom they shared a mother or father or both.

These stories tell us about the importance of stability and routine, along with appropriate reliable contact with family. We all need to recognise that children have a capacity for success, whatever context they grow up in. Masten and Coatsworth (1998) write that:

Successful children remind us that children grow up in multiple contexts ... and each context is a potential source of protective as well as risk factors. These children demonstrate that children are protected not only by the self-righting nature of development, but also by the actions of adults, by their own actions, by the nurturing of their assets, by opportunities to succeed and by the experience of success (p.216).

## 5 Being given high expectations

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What adults believe about looked after children, what they say, and how they behave, gives powerful messages which shape children's attitudes and beliefs about themselves. Many of the participants in the study talked about the impact on them of the expectations of others. Where important adults had high expectations of the participant, this appeared to have contributed to their success.

Matthew was 22 at the time of the study. He had become looked after and accommodated with foster parents when he was three. His mother had died and although family members initially tried to provide care for him, he had to be moved to foster care. Matthew remained with these foster carers, who supported him through school then higher education. When we met him, Matthew had recently returned to his home town and was living with his foster carers again. He told us that his foster carers, social worker and throughcare and aftercare worker all had high expectations of him:

Through school my teacher was like, "you should try" ... so I did my highers and things ... then I was accepted ... then at the end of the year I got a first class honours degree ... that was my success – going through uni and getting that final mark.

Matthew also talked about the influence and support he had from a range of professionals, rather than just one. This was common to a number of our participants. Natalie also told us how helpful she found a multidisciplinary team that had provided support when she began living independently:

Every problem I've had, they've helped me sort it out. There's more than one worker and you can go to somebody else if you need it so they're good at doing different things and they work together and there's someone there if you need it. And six heads are better than one!

## Setting expectations

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at the looked after system is that appropriate goals, aspirations and expectations have not been set for children. Concern about the low expectations and outcomes for looked after children were reported in *Learning with Care* (HM Inspectors of Schools and SWSI 2001). Jackson and Sachdev (2001) suggest that setting low expectations is a real barrier to achievement. Expectations need to be rooted in an individual child's abilities and circumstances. They need to take into account the child's current achievements, potential for success, and what steps are needed to support success.

Ian was 15 years old when we spoke to him as part of the study. He had first become looked after and accommodated in foster care at the age of 13. He had returned home for a short period, but had returned to a second foster care placement when he was excluded from school and was involved in offending. Ian was moved from mainstream education to an alternative off site unit, but this was unsuccessful. He then began a course at college in an area of special interest to him. Ian's worker at a support project he attended told us that he believed and expected that Ian could do much more. He thought that achieving in one area would affect how Ian saw himself and the perceptions of others. Ian agreed with his worker and told us that:

I've just got my John Muir Trust award. I didn't think I was going to stick it. I was just trying to prove a point to myself that I could actually do it. I was totally chuffed when I got it. With my mum – she was like “Oh! Well done.” She was as proud as anything of me.

Ian's story demonstrates the impact of others' expectations on children and young people. These expectations influenced what he was actually able to achieve, and how he himself felt about that achievement.

Some participants, however, told us about their experience of others' low expectations of them. Theresa talked about her experience of going from achieving well at school, despite living in a very difficult home situation, to then refusing to attend at the age of 13 after moving to a residential unit. We asked Theresa about what encouragement she had to attend school:



No, there wasn't any encouragement plus the fact that it was convenient to blame the kids in care 'cos they didn't have parents advocating on their behalf, it was only care staff.

Theresa now works with young people leaving care. She feels very strongly that professional staff need to give young people a clear message that they value education, that it is critical to their future success, and that they will do all they can to support them to achieve:

There has never been an understanding of the importance of education in children's homes. The staff hide behind the child's emotional state. They say 'they're not ready for school'. That's rubbish.

## **Planning to meet expectations**

Many participants talked about the impact of planning in achieving their expectations and goals. For example, Luke told us:

It was very much in the care plan that I would go to university.

Thomas (2005) suggests that a plan should include several key elements. These are:

- the child's needs and how they are to be met
- the aims and timescale
- the proposed placement
- other services to be provided
- support in the placement and contingency plans
- arrangements for contact and reunification
- arrangements for health care and education

The plan should also specify:

- roles and responsibilities
- how far the plan takes account of the child's wishes and feelings
- arrangements for changes to the plan, disagreements and future decision-making

In other words, the plan should identify where children, families, carers and workers want to get to and the steps needed to get there. The plan should also try to answer the question, how will we know when we get to our goal? Thomas also draws on the research by Grimshaw and Sinclair (1997) to suggest that a dynamic planning process is needed that continues to feed in relevant information.

Although Scottish Executive guidance is clear that each looked after child should have a plan, what should be included is not listed in detail (Social Work Services Group, Scottish Office 1997). The Looked After Children (LAC) materials currently used by some local authorities provides a framework for planning (The Scottish office, 1999). The Scottish Executive is now developing an *Integrated Assessment, Planning and Recording Framework*, for all children (Scottish Executive 2005). It is the intention that this system will be based on a child-centred, ecological model of assessment. Such a system may make an important contribution to reframing the assessment of goals and expectations for looked after children, especially as it urges that plans should encourage ambition for children and their families. The proposed assessment framework will also call for an action plan to be made which should identify short-term and long-term outcomes, along with timescales for achievement.

## **How participants thought about their past experiences**

Looked after children have often had early experiences of adversity. Our participants were no different in this respect, with experience of parental drug and alcohol misuse, deprivation and abuse. Knowing that children have had poor early experiences, knowing that children's behaviour has led to them being looked after and accommodated, or knowing that children have experienced emotionally and psychologically damaging experiences, can all impact on adults' expectations of individual children. This in turn, can affect children's perceptions of themselves.

It is important to challenge this way of thinking if we are to maximise the opportunities of looked after children. The shifting of adults' expectations may also help looked after children in coming to terms with their pasts and raising their expectations of themselves. Furman (1998) found in his work on how people with difficult childhoods had become

successful adults, that their thinking about the past was very important in how their present and future developed. He wrote:

It's natural to think that our past has an effect on how our future will turn out, but we rarely look at it the other way round. The future – that is what we think it will bring – determines what the past looks like (Furman 1998 p.81).

Most participants in our study felt they had come a long way in coming to terms with their past traumas and negative experiences. Some participants talked about the understanding they had developed of their own parents failings, and where responsibility lay. With this acceptance, they had been able to shift their expectations of themselves. An example of this was Ross, 17, who spoke of feeling relieved of the burden of thinking that he was somehow to blame for his mother's drinking and depression:

Also, they (social workers) have helped me by explaining what's happened when I was younger like saying this is what happened and why. I mean, you have to understand why you're in this situation, also backing up that it is not your fault, and that gives you a sense of security, and that there's nothing you could have done and that maybe this is the best thing that could have happened to you.

There were many examples of participants reassessing their past from the perspective they had gained as they grew older:

In my first year at college I started to assess my life a wee bit and I sort of looked back on it and thought 'well actually, this is all right.' Despite everything, I've got this far so I reckon I can go the rest of the way. (Fraser)

Participants were proud of their achievements, given their earlier adversities and difficulties, and many saw their ability to overcome adversity and difficulty as a strength that supported them in their lives. Support from others, and their own reflections on their experiences helped them to come to such positive conclusions.

## 6 Receiving encouragement and support

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Many participants gave us examples of encouragement and support that had helped them become successful. Often, this support was provided by foster carers, residential workers, teachers and social workers but there were others, personal friends and partners, whose support and influence was no less important. Encouragement and support described by the participants included:

- mentoring
- help to understand the past and the present
- belief in the participant's ability
- unwavering commitment to the participant

In childhood and adolescence, the presence of a supportive adult is particularly important. Jack and Gill (2003), for example, report that one of the most protective factors associated with resilient children is 'a reliable and supportive relationship with an adult outside their immediate family' (p.21). Looked after children have as much need of this kind of supportive adult as do other children. The relationship between a child and the professional workers in their lives is extremely important in this respect:

I've always had the support from my social worker. I always listened to her and took her advice and she was always there for me. (Fraser)

Guidance teachers can have a special role with looked after children:

My guidance teacher, I get on really well with her. She gives you help and advice. She's like your best friend in school. It was a big change from my last school and I didn't think I'd be able to do as well as I have. I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to do it without all the support I've got. (Claire)

Through direct work, professional workers can help children understand their experiences. This can support children to develop an optimistic, problem solving approach to challenges, as advocated by Seligman (1995 and 2002). As one participant put it:

The people here have really helped me through a lot of things so I could begin to trust people again because I've been very disappointed in the past. (Alison)

The professional role in supporting and encouraging children needs to be underpinned by a genuine desire to see the child do well. Glenn told us about his social worker, who communicated with him in the way he valued and understood:

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.

Tara described her social worker's commitment to her in terms of being made to feel she was a person, not a lost cause:

She was an absolute godsend to me. She knew I wasn't an angel, she knew I was bad but she also knew why I was bad. She knew it was attention, also the fact that I was just a teenager. She was an absolute godsend, she saw me through everything. She just took the time.

In other cases, the belief was grounded in the supporter being there when needed and not giving up. Foster carers were important in providing this kind of support and there were many examples of foster carers who had stuck by children, with a tenacious commitment to their welfare, over a long period of time:

Support – support from my carers has been part of it. I keep going on about it, but you have no idea how much they helped me. (Mark)

## Support and encouragement when leaving care

Many looked after young people become independent before they reach 18 years (Stein and Carey 1986; Biehal and others 1995). Dixon and Stein's (2000) study of young people leaving care in Scotland found that nearly half of the young people they spoke to felt they had no choice about when they left care. Most other young people leave home much later than this and it is more likely that they will have choice over when they leave. This means that young people who have already experienced greater stresses or difficulties in their lives are having to adjust to adulthood much faster, with less reliable support from families than most young people have. To do this successfully, young people need local authorities to arrange both practical and emotional support from skilled and knowledgeable adults.

The Children (Scotland) Act 1996 gives local authorities duties towards young people who are looked after until they are 18 years old. It also allows local authorities to continue to give young people support, in the form of help and advice, until they are 21 years of age.

Dixon and Stein (2000) suggested that support for young people leaving care is patchy and sometimes difficult to access. Partly in response to this, the Scottish Executive has introduced pathway planning (Scottish Executive, 2004). This is designed to help young people become confident and successful. The guidance and materials can help local authorities assess young people's needs and plan how to meet these effectively. Responsibility for pathway planning extends to all local authority departments and other agencies. The guidance calls this *corporate responsibility*. Pathway planning is designed to make sure that local authorities, carers and other professionals and services work together to:

- help the young person get the knowledge and skills they need to manage a home
- get education and training for a career
- move on when the time is right

Planning should start well before the young person leaves foster or residential care and young people themselves should have a degree of control over what happens and when. Each local authority now has a lead implementation officer to help them put these new arrangements in place.

Some of the participants had been involved in this way of working. Most, however, left care before pathway planning was introduced in 2004 and their experiences varied.

Participants told us about very different experiences of financial support. Some participants were being financially supported through higher education, sometimes involving a significant amount of funding over a number of years. Financial support for other things seemed harder to obtain.

Kirsty, after leaving care and having a baby, was given a limited sum of money for a deposit on privately rented accommodation. This was the only support of any kind she received after leaving care:

So I got money for my deposit but I think quite reluctantly, they gave it to me. After that I never heard anything else from them. I never, ever felt like I could go back to them.

Theresa talked about her experience of leaving care and contrasted it with the support she now can make available for other young people, in her post as a social worker in a throughcare and aftercare team:

At that time there was the mentality that you left care and you just got on with it. Now, every young person in care in this authority, at 17 they'll have a provisional driving licence, a birth certificate, a bank account. Every young person will have an opportunity to learn a skill or go on to study.

Some participants in the study had been well supported by aftercare teams and told us about the difference this had made:

I got quite a lot of practical help, you know, like they helped with my rent and everything. Now I've got a support worker and she helps me more with emotional support and I know if I picked up the phone and said I really need to speak to someone, she'd be there. I think it's just amazing that five years down the line there's somebody still there for me. (Denise)

In the best examples of support, we found that young people were involved in the planning for their future and were supported to develop the skills they needed. They were also able to make mistakes and be helped to put these mistakes right by their supporters. Young people greatly valued getting the right kinds of financial and practical support that good parents would have provided. Many participants also related their experience of encouragement and support to what they were then able to achieve as young adults.

## 7 Being able to participate and achieve

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Achievement is essential to all children and young people. It promotes feelings of pride, and positive self-esteem. Looked after children take exactly the same pride in reaching a goal or becoming good at something as everyone else. However, achievement is very individual and the scale of a child's achievement depends on a number of factors. These factors include the hurdles children have needed to overcome, and the help and support that was available to do so.

We know that achievement contributes to children's well-being in a number of different ways. Gilligan (1998) has suggested that children's experiences at school have deep and long lasting effects on their social and educational development. Rutter (1985) sees being good at something as one of the building blocks of resilience.

Most of the participants in our study welcomed the opportunity to talk about their achievements. Several commented on how rarely they were asked about this. Some found the experience of taking part in this study and the fact that someone else had suggested them as examples of success, had caused them to think about their achievements in a new light. This too had been a boost to their confidence and self-esteem.

Participants told us about:

- finding something they were good at
- the influence of personality
- setting personal goals
- achieving in education



- success in employment
- participating in communities
- participating in new experiences
- promoting achievement and participation

Many of the participants told us about their achievements across a number of these areas.

### **Finding something you are good at**

Discovering a talent for something seemed to be particularly helpful. It improved self-confidence, provided a focus, sometimes gave a special role or place within a care setting and often provided a new social network. Achievement also supported the child to participate in other opportunities. Some participants talked about academic achievement, others about sports and some spoke about particular interests. As Jennifer, aged 18, told us:

I always used to watch out the window at all the kids out playing and never go out and play with them. And it's just through perseverance and encouragement I got more confidence but really the dancing had a lot to do with it. Being good at dancing was a real boost.

Participants also talked about how they learnt a range of skills through their sports and interests. They were then able to transfer skills learned in one setting to another:

My carers got me into karate. They got me all the stuff and came to watch me sometimes. You have to learn to control your temper when you're doing something like that, which I really needed at the time. I made some good pals up there too. (Glenn)

Adults were often a significant influence in supporting children to find things they were good at, but children seemed to need to be active participants in this process for it to work well.

## The influence of personality

Although children are clearly dependent on adults to help them be successful, psychologists are increasingly interested in how children play a part in shaping their own development (Schaffer 1998). A major factor in relation to this aspect of children's development is how individual characteristics or personality can affect outcomes.

The influence of personality characteristics in children is complex. Although there is some evidence that individual characteristics can endure throughout children's lives, there are many ways in which such characteristics will be changed by interaction with others at different stages through life:

Personality functioning includes a set of cognitions about ourselves, our relationships, and our interactions with the environment, all of which serve to make up the so-called 'self system' incorporating self-esteem, self-efficacy and social problem-solving skills (Engfer and others, 1994 p.81).

There are differences between individuals, and these will shape both how others react, and how children are influenced by others. In the study, some of the participants described their beliefs and personal strength as helping to build their confidence and resilience:

I'm of the belief that whatever doesn't get you down makes you stronger and makes you the person you are. (Fraser)

At least three participants described themselves as feeling different from those they grew up with:

I don't know, I always felt different somehow, like I wanted more from life. (Carrie)

Two participants spoke of being successful 'despite the system', emphasising their own personality and inner determination, which they felt had helped them survive:

Because I'm very clear, I am who I am because I created it. (Theresa)

Some participants also told us about the sense of achievement they gained by conquering addictions, changing harmful patterns of behaviour such as taking drugs or being involved in crime. Sometimes, becoming resilient and strong meant overcoming fears and obstacles to achievement which demanded real resolve. Colin told us about his experience of living with friends who were misusing drugs:

They were all doing the drugs and they were dealing drugs, it was absolute madness. There were strange guys coming to the house and they were all into it except for me. I think I was too strong minded or maybe I was too scared. I was too scared to even try it. I just decided not to go down that road.

## **Setting personal goals**

Many participants had set themselves personal goals which they had achieved, were in the process of achieving or planned to achieve in their future. For some participants these personal goals were academic. For some, goals were about activities and challenges which they thought they would really enjoy – travel, sports and achieving promotion at work.

Theresa told us about the deprivation she experienced as a child. She is now fulfilling her personal goal to travel the world, something she never thought she would have the confidence to do:

I've been all over the world, though I used to be terrified of flying. By next year I'll have achieved my goal of having every continent stamped on my passport. That's a big achievement for me. I do feel very humble when I'm away because I'm looking back to where I came from.

Others had goals relating to financial security and material success:

I'm going to buy a Lamborghini! (Fraser)

Others talked about satisfying relationships, with a determination to do better for their children than they felt their own parents had been able to do for them.

## Achieving in education

Formal education has long been an area where looked after young people, as a group, achieve less well than their peers. In 1999, Scottish Ministers set a target that all young people leaving local authority care should have attained standard grades in English and maths. However statistics from 2004-05 show that only 30% of 16 and 17 year olds leaving care achieved their English and Maths at SCQF level 3 and only 45% of 16 and 17 year olds leaving care had any qualifications at all. Forty per cent of young people eligible for aftercare support progress to further or higher education, training or employment when they leave school (Scottish Executive, 2004).

Of the 32 participants in this study, five were still at school. Of these five, four were in mainstream education at their local school. One disabled boy attended a specialised facility for children with complex needs.

A number of participants had gained nationally recognised qualifications or were working toward them. Five participants were in full-time study at college or university and a further three were in full-time training programmes. A further five had completed university or college courses, gaining qualifications in mechanics, administration, IT and care.

Fraser was 21 when we met with him. He had become looked after because his mother had a drink problem and was unable to care for him:

I was very aware that my mum had a drinking problem ... she was different to other mums.... As a child you pick up on these things.

Fraser moved for a short time to his father's home before he and his sister were placed with foster carers. Fraser stayed with these foster carers through his childhood and adolescence and still has his own room in his carer's house. He is now studying full-time at university, has a part-time job and is in a settled relationship. Fraser told us about his achievements in education:

I was in the top groups in primary school ... and then in the standard grades I was in the credit classes for everything ... I took five Highers ... in sixth year I got made house captain ... I liked school in general, school was cool.

In our study we found many such examples of looked after young people achieving well and to their potential.

## **Success in employment**

Employment for many people is a measure of their success. Twelve participants were in full-time employment during the course of the study. Fifteen were in further education or in part-time work. Only five of the 32 participants were unemployed at the time of interview. Of these, two had recently completed courses of study, had gained a qualification and were considering what kind of work they wanted to do. One had just left school and was waiting to hear if she had been successful in gaining a place at college. One had recently relocated to a new area with a partner and had had a number of job interviews. Only one participant had no clear direction regarding future employment although, at the time of interview, he was actively occupied in valuable voluntary work with other young care leavers.

Participants in our study were very proud of their achievements in work:

I joined the army in January and I've done my training and just passed out. I've got loads of qualifications and met lots of good mates. It's amazing. A big achievement because I never thought I would make it. I've done it and I pleased everybody and it's a great feeling. (Mark)

We also found that participants placed a high value on the status of being in work. Being in work made them feel they were ordinary citizens. They told us how work gave them a social network, opportunities for ongoing learning and a sense of pride and achievement, as well as important financial stability and the means to achieve other goals, such as owning a home.

Three participants who were in care related work, spoke of making a conscious decision to support other young people who were vulnerable, using the unique insight gained from their own childhood experiences:

I was determined that I was going to be in a position where I have some influence about the assessed needs of young people – do they have somewhere nice to live, do they have a person that's supporting them, are they going to university or are they not going

to university, are they learning to drive or not? ...I wanted to be in a job where I could make a difference. I want young people to get the support that I certainly didn't get.  
(Theresa)

## **Participating in communities**

Ben-Arieh (2002) believes one of the most important areas for developing children's sense of self-esteem is to make a contribution to the community. The value of actively participating in communities was echoed by participants who were involved in voluntary work. These people spoke about the importance to them either of giving something back (for those who felt their experiences in care had been good), or of making things better (for those who regarded their experiences in care as poor).

Gilligan (2001) and Ben-Arieh (2002) suggest that children's participation in community activities is being increasingly recognised as an important dimension of their social development and well-being. Such activities help to build social skills, confidence and self-esteem. Writers on child development have suggested that the way in which people experience pro-social and empathic behaviour towards them in childhood may influence their own behaviour towards others in adulthood (Mussen and others, 1990). Certainly, this last point was one which several participants in the study were keen to stress. They had acquired enough self-esteem through nurturing and achievements to wish to repay the help they had been given by helping others. Their views said a great deal about the positive experiences of parenting that the looked after system had given them. Colin is a volunteer football coach for young people in his local community. He told us:

I like to do something to help everyone else after all the help I've been given.

Natalie was 21 when we talked to her. She had been looked after following her stepfather's violent behaviour towards her. She had a number of foster care placements in different parts of Scotland, and had spent some time living with her grandmother. At the time we met her, Natalie was successfully caring for her young child, and was involved in mentoring

other young people. She talked about the benefits this brought her, as well as what she could offer to others:

I do think I've done well myself. I didn't used to but now I do. Being a mentor means I'm helping other people and that's a good feeling – very good.

## **Participating in new experiences**

There were two aspects of new experiences that participants thought were important. The first was that for some, being looked after exposed them to activities and experiences that they would never have had at home because of their disadvantaged circumstances and environments:

My carer took me down to Blackpool. I'd never been to Blackpool before. And I went on holiday to Mull, that was another first. At home we used to go to MacDonald's but that was just with my brother. My mum wouldn't do that, because she had a drug habit. (Ian)

The second aspect of new experiences was that children had experienced a different way of life and relating to others, which opened up possibilities of lifestyles and relationships they had not been able to see before:

The way the staff in the home treated me showed me there was another way to be and that I was a real person and I deserved to have a better life. (Carrie)

For those who had become looked after because of neglect or maltreatment, these new experiences included taking part in the routine, ordinary activities of normal family life:

We used to go to the beach on a Sunday and go swimming and that was good. And then we went camping in the summer holidays and that was a big laugh. Just lots of different things. (Shona)

One participant told us about being given the opportunity to take part in a wide variety of new experiences when he was looked after in a residential unit, and how as a parent he used this experience to benefit his own children:

I played snooker and stuff. There was more to do. Played snooker, played music, records and stuff. Went swimming, went to the park. There was lots of different things to do. At that time everyone was at the BMXing [biking]. Where I came from, no one had ever heard of the BMX! They took us on holiday. I'd never ever been on holiday before. They took me to Spain. I got the school trip to Belgium which I never ever thought I'd get, never be allowed to go if I was at home. You could say it made my whole world bigger. Now I take my own kids to these places, show them stuff so they can learn too. (Colin)

Participants also talked about having the confidence to search out new experiences, and how much this mattered. Having the confidence to explore new experiences happens when children and adults have a sufficient sense of having control, ability to make decisions and trust in oneself.

## **Promoting achievement and participation**

Sometimes, participants told us, the key to promoting a child's talents was an observant and interested adult, who recognised the child's strengths and abilities:

I used to do these drawings all the time, doodles and that. My teacher was always going mental 'cos I was drawing and not doing the work. My key worker got me doing murals on the walls at the home and I did all the bedrooms. Everyone that came in used to say how good it looked and how much did they pay to get it done? I'd like to do a course – drawing, design, that sort of thing. (Thomas)

Some participants told us about the extra efforts that their carers or workers made that made a difference to them. Ross told us he planned to join the armed services. He wanted to do as well as possible in his exams, and his social worker and the school helped him by



providing a tutor for him in important subjects. Ross also had the confidence to challenge the threat of losing this valuable support:

The tutoring did help me get better grades.... When my grades came through I was really happy and if I hadn't had the tutoring I might not have done so well. Especially in maths which is my weakest subject. And then we had this big meeting and they weren't sure I was going to be able to get any more and I said "how much pocket money do I get? And she said "why" and I said "I could save up my pocket money and pay for it myself"... I was just reinforcing the point that for me and my little brother it's been really important and it's been really helpful academically so if you take it away we might not do so well.

For all of their successes, many participants talked about the need for change in the way children are looked after. They wanted those currently being looked after to have the positive experiences they had, but they also thought there were many aspects of being looked after that could be improved. We explore these in the following chapter.

## 8 What participants want to change

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In this section we include, along with views from the 32 participants in the study, the views of ten young people who are using throughcare and aftercare services in two different parts of Scotland.

All of our participants were keen to talk about what had helped them, and what could help other looked after children. Some participants found it easier than others to articulate what they wanted to change. Where participants had had positive experiences, they wanted to see more looked after children having similar opportunities. Participants whose experiences had been less positive, perhaps in a particular aspect of being looked after, tended to focus more on why those experiences had hurt them, and how things could be done differently.

Common themes that emerged included:

- having more people that genuinely care about looked after children
- the need to increase stability and consistency
- more encouragement and support for young people
- greater participation by young people
- the need for social workers to spend time with young people and act in their interests
- the need for social workers and others to take decisive action where children's needs are not being met
- increased support for looked after children in education
- good support for young people leaving care and becoming independent
- more positive attitudes towards looked after children and young people

The first four of these themes have been discussed in detail in earlier chapters of the study, so in this chapter we have chosen to focus on the remaining five.

## Social workers

Social workers have a key role in making arrangements for looked after children and working directly with them. As Mark said:

A social worker has quite an important job because they're there to help young people.

A number of participants thought that it was better to have the same social worker rather than a number of different social workers. Participants felt it was difficult to build relationships and trust when there were frequent changes of social worker:

Sometimes it's annoying. Having to change and get to know new people all the time, you form a relationship with them then when they've gone you have to start all over with someone else. (Claire)

While consistency of social worker was important, participants also thought that children should have some influence in choosing the social worker to work with them. One participant would have preferred to have the choice of having a male social worker. Participants who had been looked after in residential care would also have liked to help choose their key worker.

Almost all of the participants told us that they regarded how their social worker behaved towards them as extremely important. In general, we found participants to be very understanding towards the difficulties and pressures experienced by their social workers, but felt let down when what they experienced seemed rude or disrespectful. Specifically, they thought that social workers should arrive on time, should try to keep appointments, and should be honest about what has happened when they are late or have not kept an appointment:

She [social worker] just turns up whenever she wants and then says it's my fault because I'm not there when she comes. I ended up cracking up at her and telling her to get lost. (Ian)

Participants felt that contact between children and their social workers should be both regular and meaningful. Several talked about their social workers visiting occasionally, often only before key meetings, and asking only superficial questions. Participants in the two groups also emphasised the importance of valuing young people and taking them seriously.

Liam gave us a list of what he thought should change in how social workers work with children. He thought it was particularly important that social workers should make sure there were opportunities for children to talk and express their feelings.

Liam was critical of the experience he had with some social workers:

The longest they take you out is to Burger King – that’s what they do, take you to Burger King and get you a burger and talk to you for three hours ...you can’t exactly break your heart in the middle of Burger King.

Other participants were also critical of this kind of superficial interaction with social workers. Glenn, who said he had had *tons* of social workers said:

Social workers never really helped. Okay they take you out to Macdonald’s for a drink, that’s it. Go to a few meetings. Talk about me and tell me what I’d done but they didn’t really physically help.

Many participants thought that social workers should be reliable. Participants valued social workers who did what they had promised to do:

If you tell her something or ask her for something, she always gets it done somehow and that is really helpful because some people you can tell but they never get it done, they take years to do it.

This issue of reliability was also discussed in the two groups, where young people had different experiences of the reliability of professional workers. All agreed that reliability helped young people develop trust, and good relationships with their workers.

As well as doing things for children, participants thought that social workers should really listen to what children and young people have to say. By listening and understanding,

participants believed social workers could positively influence both young people's behaviour, and also the course of events for them.

Christopher was 16 when he was charged with a serious crime. Because his social worker had taken time and effort to get to know him well, he was able to make a good assessment of Christopher's needs, which resulted in Christopher getting the help he needed to turn his life around:

The good thing was, because of the relationship I had with my social worker and because of the way he'd done my social background report, they thought I'd be suitable for the Smith unit. The Smith unit was the best unit I could possibly have gone to, because of my nature. He really knew me and he understood me and what was going to work for me and how I would respond best.

Michalea was in one of the groups of young people using throughcare and aftercare services. Michaela told us about her contact with a worker from a specialist service for young people leaving care. She described how this worker listened carefully to her talk about her history of stealing from people. The worker then helped her to think about why she was stealing, and the effect this had on others. From this, Michaela was able to change her behaviour and stop stealing. Michaela had a strong view that social workers should spend more time with young people engaged in this kind of work.

We discussed earlier the importance which participants placed on being helped to understand past experiences. We found that participants who had experience of social workers doing life story work thought that other children should also be able to explore their history in this way.

A number of participants had strong memories of the personality of their social worker.

These participants and others thought that social workers needed to have personality to work with children. Part of this was in expressing warmth towards children, and caring about the child themselves and what happened to them:

I had a fabulous social worker, I still recall...he was a wonderful man, a big tall man with a beard, really a father type figure. So he was very, very nice and I think he had a personal interest to make sure that I was okay and settled. (Shona)

One participant commented on the hours that social workers are available. Simone, aged 17, felt that social workers should be more available in the evenings and on weekends. She also thought that when a social worker was not at work, another social worker should be allocated to the child.

Many participants talked about their desire to have a normal life. They welcomed the opportunities that being looked after brought them, particularly normal, everyday experiences. Part of childhood is visiting friends and sometimes staying overnight. Participants described their experiences of the procedures for checking that friends, and their parents, were suitable for them to visit and stay with:

But one thing I disagree with is police checking if you are staying with friends. To me like I have got friends and I have known them for quite a while and I trust them. And it annoys me when I have got to get a police check with them because I feel embarrassed, ken saying “What did your dad do, this or that?” And I ken that social workers are only looking out to make sure that nothing happens when you are staying in that place. But I think if they trust them when you have known them for a while then I think it should be fine.  
(Tanya)

Some children, when they knew a police check would have to be made before they could stay with a friend, chose to give up the planned overnight stay. There was a strong view from a number of participants that these procedures needed to change.

Police checking for friends and relatives, and the barriers this imposed on young people’s ability to ‘blend in’ and lead the same kinds of lives as their peers, was the most common complaint raised with us during this study:

Get rid of the police checks! (Kirsty)

## The decision to remove children from home

Some participants commented on the importance of looking after and accommodating children at the right time. They believed that children should be accommodated when they needed to be, and not remain in situations which were not best for them and their development. One of the participants, Mike, who is a qualified social worker, and has worked with children himself, said:

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.

Some of these participants thought it was important to recognise when parents were not able to properly care for their children, and take appropriate action. Claire had strong views about children needing to be removed from home when their parents were unable to care for them properly. She wanted to tell social workers:

They should definitely put children into care when their parents can’t look after them properly. (Claire)

Carrie also felt that social workers are sometimes too reluctant to remove children. Her mother had a long standing alcohol problem and associated mental health issues. Carrie and her younger brother and sisters spent periods of time in care and with extended family. Carrie feels strongly that social work let her, and her family down by not acting sooner to remove the children from a chaotic and neglectful home situation:

I still can’t believe how any social worker would just let that happen.

While these views were strongly held by a number of participants, others felt equally strongly that more efforts should be made to keep children within their own families. Mike felt that assumptions were wrongly and unfairly made by the authorities at the time, that his father, a single man, would be unable to care for three young children.

Theresa felt that her teenage years would have been much happier, if more effective help had been provided to the family to allow all the children to remain at home together. Even Carrie, despite her criticism of social work allowing the children to remain at home for so long, wondered whether her father might have been a suitable carer if he had been provided with the right kind of support.

The mixed views on this topic, and the strength of feeling it generated, reflects the complexity of the decisions which social workers and others working with very complicated situations, must balance every day.

### **Education arrangements for looked after children**

In general, participants placed a high value on education, whether they had been successful in this part of their lives or not. They recognised the importance and value of formal qualifications:

I think qualifications play a big part in where you want to go. (Denise)

Many participants thought that there should be a much greater emphasis on the importance of education for looked after children. They wanted to see the support available to looked after children, such as individual tuition, increased. Some participants also thought that the support available to help children get into school, and stay in school, should be improved.

Some participants thought there should be changes to the way teachers support looked after children. Participants valued teachers who showed a genuine interest in them, encouraged them to progress and supported them when they made mistakes. One participant suggested that teachers should know and understand more about their pupils' situations in order to be able to help.

Glenn suggested that there should be a wider range of subject choice available to children in schools:

If they had other things like brick laying, things like working outside, more outside jobs or training.



Another participant suggested there needed to be more support for young people in vocational training when they left school. Others emphasised the importance of practical support being available at the time it was needed, such as money to buy books or equipment for courses.

## **Good support for young people leaving care and becoming independent**

Almost all the participants in the study had experienced leaving care and becoming independent. Many participants identified becoming independent as a key stage in young people's lives where there was a need to change and improve services.

Thomas and Alexander, who had both lived in residential care, thought that the preparation for independence needed to be improved. Alexander didn't find it easy to live independently when he became 16. He commented that in residential care:

Everything is done for you.

This makes it very difficult when young people move on. Thomas suggested that residential care staff should be better trained to help young people prepare for independence. He thought it was important for staff to understand how becoming independent is a gradual process, during which young people learn and develop life skills:

Young people should also have the opportunity to shop for food and choose what they would like to eat for that week. Give young people the chance to do chores so they can earn and save up their own money, and they could learn how to budget their own money.... After this give them a six month small scale trial of having a bit more independence, to give them confidence for when they're moving on to their first accommodation, to give them a better chance of making it work.

The accommodation available to young people leaving care was an issue of some concern to participants we interviewed, and the young people we spoke to in the two groups. Young people thought there needed to be a wider choice of different kinds of accommodation. Tara suggested living in supported accommodation as a useful step towards independent living for care leavers. One participant stressed the importance of properly assessing young people leaving care and addressing the needs identified through assessment.

Two participants had spent a number of years in residential schools which were away from their home area. When they were leaving school, these participants found that they were unable to stay on in this familiar area. This was because, even though they had been placed in these schools on a statutory order, they did not qualify for priority housing in the area. Both had had to leave the support system they had built up over the years, and return to the area (and influences) in which they first had difficulties.

When the right help and support was not available at the right time, participants did not understand the reasons why, nor did they know how to challenge such decisions.

Carrie thought that young people need to be better informed of their rights and entitlements when they leave care. She also thought it important that throughcare and aftercare services recognise that it can take some young people time to learn how to manage their lives. Young people can make mistakes and need to know that there will still be services and support available to them if something goes wrong:

Real parents would try to help, even if you were older, and young people who have been in care might need more time than others to work things out and get themselves settled down. They need to kick back a bit – they shouldn't be punished for it forever. (Carrie)

## **Attitudes and perceptions of looked after children should be more positive**

In the introduction to the study, we referred to the lack of current research that has a focus on looked after children and good outcomes. We quoted Fraser, who said:

There's never anything in the press about people such as myself having a nice time in care.

Most of our participants talked about the need for a shift in the attitudes to, and perceptions of looked after children. Sometimes this related to a particular person or group of professionals. While there was most concern about the public perception of looked after children and the media representation of looked after children's lives, participants also talked of encountering unhelpful attitudes among professionals whom they expected to be more informed, such as social workers, teachers and health professionals. Some thought

that general attitudes needed to change and that there needs to be more said publicly about the positive experience of children being looked after and the successful adults they can grow into.

Some participants talked about the worries they had as children:

I wasn't really scared of anybody finding out, I was more scared of their opinion of me as a person rather than my situation. Would they think it was my fault? And then I told my head teacher about what was happening at home and he told me there were three other people in the class who were in foster care and I was like "who is it?". That helped me realise that normality isn't what you first think and that you need to deal with the person ... and that as long as I was myself I was normal. (Ross)

Similarly, Jodie talked about her awareness of somehow being different because she was being looked after away from home. She thought that there should be good publicity about being in care and there should be more positive role models.

Ross believed that people should be much more aware of looked after children and the reasons why they are looked after. In particular, adults needed to better understand these situations from the child's point of view. Mike said he wanted to see more positive images of looked after children and young people in the media.

## 9 Conclusions

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In the course of this study five factors emerged as being critical to the success of our participants:

- having people in their lives who cared about them
- experiencing stability
- being given high expectations
- receiving encouragement and support
- being able to participate and achieve

The most important of these appeared to be stability in places and people, which all participants saw as vital to their success and to the success of other looked after children:

It doesn't work, going backwards and forwards. It's more hassle, you just have to move everything, not having all my stuff in one place and having to go back for stuff, it makes you feel awkward even though it's supposed to be your own house ... going into a new place, it's hard. (Natalie)

Many of the participants had experience of more than one of these success factors being in place in their lives. Our findings should encourage the people who care for looked after children, and the people who have responsibility for looked after children, to promote these factors in children's lives. As Fraser said:

In my opinion, it would help to try and recreate the factors that I had.

Promoting these positive factors for looked after children is the responsibility of all those who are involved in their lives. It is particularly important that elected members, together with senior and middle managers take a close interest in the progress of looked after

children and do all they can to encourage and support their achievements. All of those concerned need to act as good parents, at all stages of looked after children's lives. As Claire tells us:

People should give children lots of praise and give them lots of belief in themselves.

The vision for all of Scotland's children is that they should be safe, nurtured, healthy and active, achieving, respected and responsible and included. The challenge for all of us is to look honestly at each aspect, and ask ourselves if we are doing everything in our power to fulfil this vision for looked after children.

We know that looked after children can overcome early experience of trauma and adversity. Our participants demonstrate that children's histories do not have to predict their future, and that journeys through childhood to adulthood can be changed. We are learning that being looked after should be a time at which there is real opportunity for change. We want all of our looked after children to be able to say, like Colin:

I'm glad the way my life's turned out. I couldn't wish for any better. If I'd had the perfect family maybe, but I didn't and I can't change that and you know, I'm very happy – very happy when all's said and done. (Colin)

# Appendix 1 – Methodology

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## The sample

The sample of participants was self-selecting, in that participants opted to take part in the study. We developed two criteria to define success in broad terms which were:

- participants are demonstrably able to make and sustain meaningful relationships
- participants are engaged in some kind of work, education, training or meaningful activity

Using these criteria, we asked all local authorities and a number of voluntary organisations in Scotland to help us make contact with young people or adults who had been looked after and who had experienced success in their lives. We were also able to advertise the study to people working within the Scottish Executive. Some people who heard of the study through word of mouth also contacted us direct and offered to participate. We recognise this approach has limitations, but we found that in fact our participants had a broad experience of being looked after and accommodated. All types of care settings were represented in our group, including kinship care, foster care, residential care, secure care, prison and other specialist settings.

This method of recruitment led to the inclusion of 32 individuals in the study, a sample of sufficient size to identify some common themes. In addition, we interviewed two groups, totalling ten young people who are using throughcare and aftercare services, and have included this material in chapter 8.

## Methods

The methods used in the study were qualitative. At the outset, we identified three themes, informed by current research on children, which provided the means by which the study's aims could be tested.

These were:

- what success each participant had achieved to date
- what the participant thought had been helpful to them and had contributed to that success
- what participants thought could be done or done differently to improve the experience of and outcomes for looked after children and young people in Scotland, now and in the future

Participants were invited to participate in a loosely structured interview. We asked all participants open questions and allowed them to talk about the themes and tell us their stories. During the interview, as well as exploring the three themes, we gathered information about each person's current circumstances, and the circumstances that led to them becoming looked after. Interviews were kept as free flowing as possible. By this means, we were able to give participants maximum scope to tell their stories in their own way. We recognise that there are some limitations in the inclusion of retrospective material and that memories may not be entirely accurate. However, the reason for using this approach was to capture participants' own perceptions about their experiences.

## **Data collection and analysis**

Following initial discussion, where agreement was reached that the person should participate in the study, we arranged to conduct an interview at the location of the participant's choice. Our preference was to tape record the interviews, with the participant's agreement, to ensure we gained as full and accurate information as possible and this was achieved in 27 cases.

One participant had significant physical and learning disabilities and the interview was conducted with his carers. In three cases, participants declined to be tape recorded or conditions for taping were not suitable and we took detailed notes of the interview. In the remaining two cases we were given written accounts. Two participants discussed an issue with us that we then followed up on their behalf, and with their agreement.

All of the recorded interviews were transcribed. The information from the interviews was transferred onto a database for analysis, together with the notes from interviews that had not been taped. While we followed the three themes in the analysis, we also identified other themes as they emerged from this process.

A personalised letter of thanks, together with a gift token was sent to each participant.

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# Celebrating success: what helps looked after children succeed

This study was undertaken by the Social Work Inspection Agency, previously the Social Work Services Inspectorate. It is published as one of several supporting documents for a wider review of services and outcomes for looked after children, the main report of which is entitled *Extraordinary Lives*.

The aim of the study was to understand from people who have experienced being looked after, what helped them become and feel successful. We wanted to listen to those who had gone on to experience success in their lives, and to find out what they felt made a difference.

The key messages of this study are that being looked after can provide an opportunity for positive change in a child's life, but that the attitudes and actions of adults who provide direct care for looked after children, or who support their care in other ways, are critical. Meaningful relationships with skilled, caring and committed adults, and the opportunity to experience stability and consistency emerged from the study as particularly important.

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