INSIGHTS

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Care experience and friendship

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Key points

- The desire for friendship is common to most children and young people.
- A lack of supportive friendships is linked to poorer health and wellbeing through the life course.
- Friendship can be defined in many ways. It is important to reflect on our own definitions and experiences of friendship and create safe spaces for the people we support to talk about how they understand and experience friendship.
- In Scotland, the publication of *The Promise* means there is a clear policy mandate to make supporting friendship a priority in relation to children and young people who are care experienced.
- The care 'system' can create artificial barriers to making and keeping friends. People with care experience should have the same opportunities for friendship as others.
- There is a strong policy imperative for 'friendship-focused support' to move from the margins to the centre in how we think about, and support, children and young people.
- 'Friendship-focused support' can take many forms but should include: talking with people about what friendship means to them; talking about friends and what these relationships are like; identifying friendship hopes and goals; and working alongside people to make plans that will support friendships and positive social connections to grow.
- Adults should recognise how important friendships are when making plans. This should include thinking ahead to take account of any new obstacles that might happen for the child or young person because of changes in their care.

Introduction

This *Insight* is being written as we approach the two-year anniversary of a global pandemic which disrupted the lives and relationships of people across the globe. During this time many people, from all walks of life, experienced increased isolation from friends and loved ones as governments encouraged 'social distancing' to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Youth loneliness, already higher pre-pandemic than in adult groups, increased throughout the UK, impacting on young people's mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2021). Evidence suggests that those with care experience may have suffered more from isolation and declining mental health over this period than other groups of young people (Kelly and colleagues, 2021). This is as a result of smaller social networks pre-pandemic, digital exclusion, poverty and the reduced accessibility of services (Roesch-Marsh and colleagues, 2021).

However, the COVID-19 restrictions also saw a growth in creative and flexible responses to children and young people by statutory and third sector agencies (Ferguson and colleagues, 2022), as well as from voluntary and advocacy groups (Who Cares?, 2022). Many benefited from a less process driven response by social workers and carers, and instead, described a sense of being cared for and about (Stanley, 2021).

> This *Insight* [explores] friendship, why it matters and how it can be better supported

This *Insight* draws on research and policy, as well as practice experience to explore friendship, why it matters and how it can be better supported. It looks critically at the nature of friendship and the impact that aspects of the 'care system' can have on children and young people making and maintaining friends. It highlights how significant friendships can be for children and young people who are 'looked after'. In Charlie's words (cited in Irvine, 2022):

Because you don't always have a stable network of people that you can talk to about things, you can't go home and lash out, because you don't know if you can

stay there after, you know?... at least with your friends, you can rant, you can get it out and then they can go home and they can deal with their emotions separately.

Policy context

The wellbeing of children is a core feature of policy and practice in Scotland and underpins The Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) national practice model. Practitioners are required to consider eight wellbeing indicators which represent '... areas in which children need to progress in order to do well now and in the future' (Scottish Government, 2016). Children's friendships are recognised as important within this framework, albeit, appearing on the side lines (Byron, 2017).

There are important links between wellbeing and friendship. Existing research involving children and adults has shown that loneliness and social isolation increase the risk of physical and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, poorer immune functioning, and serious illness (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). Improving the number and quality of friendships has shown to enhance mental and physical health and feelings of happiness (Bagwell

and Schmidt, 2011; Howarth and Hart, 2007; Majors, 2012; Carr, 2018; Lang and Fingerman, 2015; Demir, 2015; The Children's Society, 2020b).

Much of our current efforts to improve care and support for people with care experience in Scotland are being driven by *The Promise* – the final report of The Independent Care Review, which sets out 'a new approach' to enable children and young people to 'thrive' through the provision of 'loving, supportive and nurturing relationships' (2020, p6). *The Promise* describes five foundations on which change will be built: voice, family, care, people and scaffolding. Recommendations and insights shared in relation to 'people' have particular relevance for friendship. This foundation states:

The children that Scotland cares for must be actively supported to develop relationships with people in the workforce and wider community, who in turn must be supported to listen and be compassionate in their decision-making and care. (p22)

Friendships in particular are highlighted:

Friendships and relationships with people in the workforce and wider community are important. These

relationships may be where children find the love and care they need. Children in care must be actively supported to develop connections and relationships. Relationships must not be prevented by an assumption that children may come to harm and / or face unnecessary risk (p23).

It is seen as the responsibility of those involved with people with care experience to support connections and relationships in their many forms, and to remove any barriers that may exist to making or keeping friends. To this end, the report makes a strong statement about the need to prioritise connections:

Friendships with peers must be actively encouraged with support for and trust in the judgement of the main carer rather than over reliance on risk protection procedures, such as police checks before a child in care can go to a friend's house for a sleepover (The Promise, 2020, p24).

What is friendship?

In social work and social care practice and research, the terms 'friend' and 'peer' are often used interchangeably. For example, written assessment reports will often talk about 'peer relationships' rather than friendships. However, these two terms are distinct and should be used differently. 'Peer' is usually used to encompass all those of a similar age (Naylor, 2011), while 'friendship' suggests mutual care, respect and informality. In any given peer group children will '… find friends, companions, rivals, co-workers, future spouses' (Healy, 2018, p241).

In an everyday sense, the term 'peer' is rarely used by children or young people to describe their relationships (Irvine, 2022). Instead, children and young people tend to refer to 'friends' – most say that having friends is one of the most important things for their happiness (Rees, 2017; The Children's Society, 2020b). In his discussion about what makes him feel good Colm (cited in Emond, 2014) says:

If you have someone to talk to and sit down with, that's your age, not someone who is an adult, cos looking up at an adult talking, you feel uncomfortable.

Importantly, how children and young people understand the term 'friend' is shaped by a range of different factors, including their age and stage of development, as well as what they have learned about friendship at home, at school, and in the community (Day and Erdley, 2016).

Various definitions of friendship appear in a wide range of international research and literature, spanning different academic disciplines. Many of these studies include the views of children on what makes a friend (Dunn and colleagues, 2002). However, key features emerge as useful in deepening our thinking about what friendship is or could be:

- Friendship connects with ideas of '... love, freedom and choice ... a voluntary relationship that includes a mutual and equal emotional bond, mutual and equal care and goodwill, as well as pleasure' (Lynch, 2015, p9).

- Friendships include the idea of '... intimacy, equality, shared interests, and pleasurable or need-satisfying interactions' (Bliezner and Roberto, 2003, p 159).

- The notion of 'reciprocity' is also highlighted. Hartup and Stevens (1997) explain that although the nature of exchanges and interactions in our friendships change over time as we develop, true friendship will always be characterised by reciprocity.

- Friendships are sometimes chosen and sometimes given and levels of commitment between friends can vary greatly (Spencer and Pahl, 2004). Friends may become 'family like' because of the levels of love, responsibility and continuity in these relationships, while some family relationships may be described as 'friend like' because of the confidences, interests and free time shared with each other.

- Ideas about the nature of friendship have changed over time and vary across cultures. To understand someone's ideas about friendship it is important to understand their culture and wider context (Adams and Allan, 1999).

- The digital world is changing how we define and practice friendship, with social media, online gaming and messaging apps providing important new forums for making and maintaining friendships (Raghunandan, 2018).

- Defining friendship is an ongoing process that shapes '... our identities, convictions, participation, and possibilities' (Rawlins, 2008, p45).

- Friendships are not always supportive or mutually beneficial relationships. There can be a 'dark side' to friendships and negative friendships can be very damaging for how we feel about ourselves (Smart and colleagues, 2012).

Although these show that friendship is a complex and contested concept, bounded by context, many definitions

of friendship have common features: reciprocity, mutual respect, equality, and emotional bond and care.

Friendship and care experience

Across the world there have been very few studies which have explored friendship from the perspective of people with care experience (Roesch-Marsh and Emond, 2021). In our review of the literature, we found only 11 empirical projects with some explicit focus on friendship and care experience, and a further 30 which mentioned friendship as part of a wider focus for example on leaving care (for overview see Roesch-Marsh and Emond, 2021). This is significant given how frequently the topic of friendships featured in our practice and how important friendships were to the young people we supported. However, the work that has been undertaken shares common findings in relation to how friendship is experienced by children and young people in care.

SECURITY, CONTINUITY AND TRUST

The bedrock of how Scotland cares must be consistent, loving relationships to support children to develop trusting relationships (The Promise, 2020, p60).

It is recognised that children and young people need emotional and physical safety and warmth; and reliable, caring and trusting relationships to support their development and overall wellbeing (Emond and colleagues, 2016). According to Howe (1997): '… the quality of relationships between people matters, not just as congenial social experiences but as a fundamental requirement in the formation of individual selves who are psychologically coherent, emotionally empathic and socially competent' (p164).

For many children who are looked after, friendships are a key source of security and care. As Alana (cited in Irvine, 2022) describes:

As a teenager especially, they're like one of your main supports, and to have your friends like always there, no matter where they are, especially for me, that's just a big thing cos it's good to, if there's something wrong in the home, or you just need someone to talk to but you can't, don't feel like you can talk to a social worker or your carer or whatever, not parents, whatever, friends: they're like always supportive, no matter what.

Childhood friendships offer important opportunities for rehearsing relationship skills. These can include

exploring and testing out how to set boundaries around what a child wants to do and with whom, as well as learning how to cope with disagreement and resolution and the beginning and endings of relationships. Friendships also provide the chance to examine and learn about trust: who might be trustworthy and how to build trust and safety in relationships (Blieszner and Roberto, 2003).

Studies exploring the friendship experiences of those with care experience have shown that trust is also important to friendship formation. Although trust is a key pillar of friendship, studies suggest that care experienced children and young people who have been repeatedly let down by professionals, family members and / or the care system, may find it difficult to trust people and take risks to make new friends (Ridge and Millar, 2000; Holland and Crowley, 2013; Rogers, 2017). In Irvine's (2022) study of friendship and peer mentoring, young people with care experience said that trust was vital to them as many felt so let down

Studies exploring the friendship experiences of those with care experience have shown that trust is also important to friendship formation

by others in the past. They described a sense of needing to protect their experiences and lives from others until trust could be established:

> Trust is a big thing for friends. Make sure they don't talk about you or whatever and tell them everything and that, yeah (Cara, cited in Irvine, 2022).

The experience of being accommodated and then having to move placement and its impact on relationships and friendships was powerfully described by young people who took part in the Independent Care Review.

> [The Independent Care Review] '… heard from many children and adults who experienced far too many moves to allow for them to make friends and build relationships, settle at school and in neighbourhoods and communities' (2021, p67).

These concerns have been long-standing across the UK. Research into care experience and friendship has shown how a lack

of stability and continuity in where children are living and who is looking after them can have a significant impact on opportunities to make and keep friends (Happer and colleagues, 2006; Bown, 2010; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011). Such research highlights how hard it is for children to trust that they are going to be able to remain where they are for long enough to invest in relationships with others. As Alana (cited in Irvine, 2022) describes:

> *I have made a friend in care but it's always hard to keep up those friendships, especially if they move on and you are staying somewhere and then you also have your friends outside and then you're at different schools most of the time and it all just changes once either of you move on or whatnot.*

Such experiences of constant change have longer term implications, given that keeping friends or making new friends can be one of the most important factors in ensuring positive transition experiences across the life-course (Hartup and Stevens, 1997). Friends can provide crucial emotional and practical support to people with care experience and can help them feel a sense of belonging and positive identity beyond their care status (Dixon and Stein, 2002; Törrönen, 2006; Hiles and colleagues, 2014).

PROFESSIONAL CULTURES, PRACTICES AND UNDERSTANDING

Although there are a limited number of studies, our review of the literature on friendship echoes many of the findings of *The Independent Care Review*: too often the rules and cultures of the care system place constraints on the making and keeping of friends. The practice of completing police checks on friends and their families, overly rigid interpretations of health and safety guidelines, and risk averse cultures, were all identified as barriers to making and keeping friends for those in the care system (Happer and colleagues, 2006; Milligan and Stevens, 2006; Bown, 2010; Gallagher and Green, 2012). Institutional, unwelcoming physical environments also make young people reluctant to bring their friends into these spaces (Blower and colleagues, 2004).

Despite a growing movement led by people with care experience to reclaim the care identity (Who Cares?, 2022) many children and young people continue to report a sense of shame and stigma resulting from being in care. The stigma attached to care can result in children in care being targeted or ostracised by other children (and their parents/

carers) with assumptions made about why they are in care. Together these can lead to feelings of shame and a sense of being different. Joe (cited in Emond, 2014) talks about whether to tell people at school that he lived in a children's home:

> I wouldn't tell anybody like. It depends on their character like, if they have mates that will slag you about it like … if I tell someone that I live in a children's home that kids can't, that kids have been beaten around by their parents or anything like that right? … if I tell someone and they tell a few friends and they tell a few mates and you know how this stuff starts and eventually everyone starts asking me questions and slagging me and talking behind my back about it all and all that sort of stuff … Well I don't want that to happen like.

The research on care experience and friendship has also shown that many foster carers, residential workers and social workers fail to recognise the importance of friendships or undertake work to support friendships (Lipscombe and colleagues, 2003; Bown, 2010; McMurray and colleagues, 2011). Like many parents (Hill, 1998), reasons for this include worries around children's vulnerability to negative peer influences and a lack of awareness about how to best support friendships, particularly in adolescence (Fisher and colleagues, 2009; Hammond and colleagues, 2018; Sanders and colleagues, 2014; Sen, 2016).

Gaps in understanding about the digital world may also be a factor. Children and young people describe engagement in the digital world as essential for maintaining friendships, while carers and social workers are predominantly focused on the risks of online environments (May-Chahal and colleagues, 2014; Sen 2106; Macdonald and colleagues, 2017; Hammond and colleagues, 2018). Supporting friendships includes understanding where and how children practise friendship, including in online spaces, and understanding how digital skills and autonomy are '… an important part of safeguarding and transitions to independence' for those with care experience (Hammond and colleagues, 2018, p2072).

FINDING FRIENDS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF 'CARE'

Some children and young people with care experience particularly value friendships with others in the care system (Rogers, 2017; Gallagher and Green, 2012; McMurray and colleagues,

2011; Adley and Jupp Kina, 2014). This shared experience can help young people deal with the stigma associated with being in care (Rogers, 2017; McMurray and colleagues, 2011). Children and young people in care can be an important source of care and support for one another: sharing material possessions, giving encouragement, and sticking up for each other (Emond, 2003, 2014). Friends with care experience can also be a source of safety and wellbeing, with friends looking out for each other's 'safety and quality of care' (Bown, 2010, p229). As *The Promise* (2020) also highlighted, changing placements and leaving care can result in a painful rupturing of these critical relationships, resulting in many young people experiencing more loss and pain (Morgan, 2012).

It is important to note, however, that not all care experienced children or young people want to befriend others with care experience, and friendships between those who live together should not be assumed or forced. In some care settings there are also issues with peer violence and bullying which make friendship impossible; carefully planning moves and new placements, working with group dynamics, and creating a caring culture is essential if friendship is to be possible (Mazzone and colleagues, 2018). It is also important to support children and young people to develop friendships out-with their care setting. As one study showed, having friends outside of the care system mitigated against some of the risks associated with being 'in care' and helped young people feel more 'normal' (Gallagher and Green, 2012).

Implications for the social services workforce

This *Insight* highlights the need for the workforce to pay much greater attention to the issue of friendship. With the publication of *The Promise* there is now a strong policy imperative for 'friendship-focused support' to move from the margins to the centre in how we think about, and support, our children and young people.

A helpful guide produced by The Children's Society (2015) suggests that the only way to truly respect the importance of friendship in the lives of children in care is to ensure that 'friendships are included in agendas, acknowledged in placement planning meetings, discussed in supervisions and are an integral part of children and young people's reviews' (The Children's Society, 2014, p14).

Friendship needs to be more routinely discussed and recorded in the cycle of assessment, care planning and review for children and young people.

However, this is only one dimension of what could be considered 'friendship focused support'. This support includes many of the everyday things we have discussed:[1]

- Regularly talk with children and young people about what friendship means to them. Books, music and film can be a valuable support in these conversations.
- Hear from children and young people about who their friends are, what these relationships are like, and how they would like them to be.
- When friendships are hard, listen respectfully and problem solve together, offering comfort and advocacy. It is important to remember the role that friendship has in rehearsing and trying out ways of coping and managing relationships and who we are in them.
- Facilitate contact with friends, even if they live further away.

- Identify friendship hopes and goals with children and young people
- Work alongside children and young people to make plans that will support friendships and positive social connections to grow. This could include accessing new activities, organising playdates and sleepovers, and making use of social media or other online spaces.
- Model what it is to be a friend. This can include the more challenging aspects of friendships and how these can be managed and resolved.
- Take these relationships seriously. Friendships matter to children and young people.

We also need to remove procedural barriers to friendship. As *The Promise* has identified, we must not allow risk protection procedures to limit opportunities for developing and maintaining the 'loving, supportive and nurturing relationships' that will support children and young people to 'thrive' (The Promise, 2020, p6). This means thinking about how to make foster and residential care welcoming for friends, and enable children to take part in friendship activities such as sleepovers and trips, and being flexible and facilitative in our practice to make sure those with care experiences have similar opportunities to others their age.

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1   The Children's Society (2020) have provided a generic guide for adults on how to support friendship. Some of their suggestions are very similar to ours and they also provide some useful discussion about how adults can intervene when they are worried about friendships.

Being a friend to others also means being a friend to oneself. For this reason, it is important to encourage self-esteem and a positive sense of identity as crucial aspects of friendship support. Helping children and young people to understand their own histories is key. Children and young people may also need support to know how to explain and present the care experience part of their lives to friends and others (should they so wish). Supporting them to feel a sense of ownership of their history includes helping them to decide what they want to remain private. Both how they talk about it and who they share information with is likely to change as they get older or as friendships become deeper and more established. Adults need to be available to support this (Emond and colleagues, 2016).

Children and young people also need a safe space to work through any worries they might have about how sharing information about their families or their life in care may influence the behaviour of others (McMurray and colleagues, 2011). Social workers and carers can help children and young people to work out strategies for how to deal with rejection and cruelty (not just in relation to care experience), and be there to comfort them and advocate for them when things are difficult (Dansey and colleagues, 2019).

Friendship is not always easy or safe, but it does matter immensely to children and young people. As adults supporting children and young people in care we ought to trust and nurture their insights into what constitutes good friendships, in order to support these vital relationships (Holland, 2010; Hyde and colleagues, 2017). As Mandy (cited in Ridge and Millar, 2000) so clearly explains:

When you've lost your family, your friends are everything.

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with children and their families. She is also the Co-Director of The Binks Hub, an
interdisciplinary research hub developing research which engages communities in
creative ways, and Programme Director in Social Work for the PhD and MSc by Research.

Dr Ruth Emond is a qualified social worker and is currently the director of the
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therapeutic service for children and families who have experienced trauma.
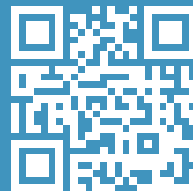
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