

Children in care are not just numbers: we must challenge the stigma

Children in care are too often seen as delinquents, and the shame lingers into adulthood. Those with experience must challenge this by sharing their stories



'I felt the need to hide the fact I was in care. What if school friends found out?' (Picture posed by models.) Photograph: Getty Images

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Jimmy Paul

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All too often, children in care are seen as dangerous, delinquent or damaged goods. The circumstances of their early life, which are likely to include trauma, abuse and neglect, are commonly forgotten. Instead, we see communities protesting against residential care homes being built in their neighbourhood. We think children in care are there because they have somehow played a part in their fate. They've become a number, a case, a file.

Being in care often intensifies, instead of soothing, early trauma. The stigma of having been in care adds to this burden.

I entered the care system on my 11th birthday. It's something I've carried with me ever since. I used to do everything I could to hide my care identity. It is hard to break free from your past and to be open with people when you desperately need support.

It's well documented that consistent, nurturing and authentic relationships help vulnerable children to overcome early abuse. Unfortunately my local authority had a high turnover of social workers. I never had the same person for long enough to build a proper relationship. And even so, those allocated to me rarely visited. There are several instances in my case files of social workers cancelling visits because I was "doing well at school" and "was happy, according to his foster parents". My wellbeing was speculated about from afar.

My teachers at school were really supportive, but I still felt the need to hide the fact I was in care. What if school friends found out? What if the stereotypes of failure became a self-fulfilling prophecy? I wasn't willing to take that risk. Rejection, uncertainty and a lack of love can be extremely isolating. I still felt the weight of the label when I went to university. The sense of guilt, shame and unworthiness were so deep-rooted that I concealed my care experience into adulthood. My life was a charade.

It's commonly stated that those with care experiences are more likely to go to prison than university, are more likely to have a diagnosable mental health issue, and face worse outcomes. More work is needed to establish definite statistics around this; but much more work needs to take place to ensure that the voices of those who have experienced care are included in this.

Assumptions (in the absence of qualitative richness) lead some parts of society to believe that children in care belong to a form of underclass. The offspring of delinquents, who deserve to feel the way I felt. I was extremely aware of the stereotypes of what care experienced adults turn out like and I felt like I constantly needed to blend in with others not to become a statistic.

Thankfully, I'm now in a position to use my experience to challenge this perception. We must stop sending these damning messages to some of the most vulnerable children at times of real uncertainty in their lives.

The reality is that the vast majority of looked-after children are in care through no fault of their own - and I believe we need to do more to help young people own their care identities. At the age of 27, I finally started to do so and joined the looked-after children's sector. My experience in care no longer overwhelms me and I no longer feel the need to hide it: it has grown into wings that help me to fly.

I'm often asked what people can do to change things. All you need to do is speak to, read about and listen to people who have experienced care. There are fantastic organisations out there, such as Who Cares? Scotland and Become, who champion those voices. Mentoring, the third sector, volunteering and self-education are all hugely eye-opening, but those with care experience can also bring greater meaning to the statistics by sharing their stories.

If you have experience of the care system, you have something to contribute. You can do this in any way you feel comfortable and challenge society's view of children in care. Own your care identity: be proud of it - it's nothing to be ashamed of.

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