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The Family Court Journal aims to provide a forum for sharing good practice and fostering debate about working with children and young people involved in family court proceedings and related matters. Submissions are welcome from anyone with an interest in the family justice system. The views expressed by contributing authors are not necessarily those of the Editor or the Editorial Board.

Notes for Contributors

Contributions will be reviewed in accordance with Editorial policy. Notes and guidance for contributors are available from the Editor.

We are looking for articles on research findings, analysis of policy or law, case

studies or reports of innovative practice. Letters and suggestions for book reviews and films, etc are also welcome.

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Editorial – John Mallinson

This edition of the Family Court Journal comes to you at a time of year when most of us are looking forward to a spot of leave, a chance to restore, rejuvenate and rest. It is not always easy to switch off, some of us are better at doing that than others, but it is important to focus on our work-life balance and if possible, adopt a more relaxed persona at least for a few weeks.

Our role as practitioners hardly seems to ease with the perpetual stack of new cases being allocated and never-ending demands upon our specialist skillset. A fine line is walked between job satisfaction, professional integrity and exhaustion, one eye on the clock, hand tightly gripping a favourite brain-booster-beverage, and an insatiable longing for a breather, however brief. Looking after ourselves is so important but also keeping an eye on how our colleagues are doing is a moment well spent.

In the Family Court Journal this time we have a couple of articles that discuss aspects of care experiences and the issue of children's post-adoption relationship with their birth family.

An account of a service that provides general advice and support to applicants /respondents attending Court as litigants-in-person is not a new initiative but one that is becoming increasingly crucial to so many as they are faced with the prospect of navigating a complex judicial journey due to the chronic absence of state funded legal assistance. This article features a project that is available in Manchester.

An update from *For Baby's Sake* is timely and pertinent as the programme provided to families and the reported outcomes are impressive, guiding the parents towards change and enabling them to break the

cycle of abusive behaviours thereby creating a safer and settled home environment for their children.

The book review reflects on an interaction between a young female in an Irish convent-run home /laundry for single mothers and relinquished babies during an era when they were shunned by society. In exchange for work in the laundry, the girl receives basic board and lodging, but the reality of the situation raises dilemmas and long-suppressed memories for the coalman who makes contrasts between his own daughter and the young female, causing a quandary regarding speaking out critically and the negative impact that such outspokenness could have upon his business.

There is a new slot in this edition for a poem which may become a regular feature. The poem reflects a child-related theme, and this will continue to be the focus as future contributions are submitted.

Another new feature is under the heading *Letters to the Editor*. This can provide a forum for a wide range of relevant subjects to be aired anonymously. It is hoped that readers will submit letters which in turn will generate debate and a timely exchange of thoughts, experiences, concerns and information.

The cartoon in this edition reflects some elements of uncertainty being mooted regarding the *Pathfinder* pilots currently underway in various parts of the country.

Making Care Experience a Protected Characteristic to Create Systemic Change

Terry Galloway

The idea of care experience as a protected characteristic first came to my mind from Duncan Dunlop who was advising the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, headed by Josh MacAlister at the time. I baulked at the thought of businesses employing care-experienced people. It was more likely to be avoided like the plague and my first reaction was '*not a chance*'.

I had been pestering Duncan to push for changes as he went. I liked the fact that the Scottish review had caused its government to introduce a national exemption in respect of council tax for care-experienced people even before the review had concluded. I felt that whatever parts the English review examined would bring attention to this exemption because it was cited as a once in a generation chance to create required change. Wherever the *Eye of Sauron* looks is what people focus on, and I felt the care review had that power. I wanted to try for change as part of the journey, which is why I was pestering them so much.

In my interview, I told them that I would be here when the Care Review had concluded and everyone had gone home. I was intent on making change and that I would do it with or without them. On reflection, this was quite an arrogant thing to say which may explain why I wasn't chosen after the interview. However, my arrogance was the resilience that I had built up over the years against so many people saying *things would never change*. I

was having none of that doctrine. I always try to look at things from a different perspective and this is what I did with protected characteristics before the penny dropped.

Personal Experience – Hazel's story

I had travelled from Nottingham to Devon for a funeral and I was at my sister's flat. Hazel was very thin, her face was gaunt, addicted to drugs and alcohol having recently lost her children to the care system; she was simply existing. She said to me '*Terry, I don't want to die; I don't want to be next*'. At that moment, all I could do was to give her hope that one day we would change the care system so that others would not have to follow in our footsteps. We spent hours that night talking about it. She would say that I had the brains, and she had the heart. It felt like we were in the Land of Oz, walking down the Yellow Brick Road.

That night we made a promise to each other that we would change the care system together. We had no clue, what or when, we just knew we had to get our voices out, we had to make people aware of what we had been through so that changes could be made. We were thinking TV, books, anything that would raise consciousness of care experience across society.

Just several months later, my mum received a call from the police in Devon to tell her that Hazel had been found dead. The yell she let out upon hearing the news was something I never want to hear again. Hazel had been stabbed through the back right into her heart by her boyfriend at her flat in Paignton. He left her on the floor

for two days before giving a tip-off. Never did I expect that, never did I suspect she was suffering domestic abuse.

We were a very complex family. There was me, my mum, my uncle Rob, my brother James, and Hazel the oldest. We had been known to Children's Services since birth and they were always the enemy. My first memory of conflict with them was at a very early age. It was Christmas time. I had plucked up the courage to tell my mum that the boy in the foster home had done things to me that I did not like. I had had to walk around naked when my foster family had visitors, and this felt uncomfortable.

She called the foster home and said we had got stuck in the snow so could not return that night. She also called the police who came to see me. I remember them giving me a round sticker to wear with pride for how well I had done for telling them. This was the first time I had felt really listened to but it was short lived once social services arrived as they took me and Hazel back to our foster family in Warrington.

My mum was distraught. She went to someone higher-up in the police and they went straight over to Warrington and rescued us. They brought us right back home to our mum; it was all hushed up and over the decades our behaviour became a trauma response. Hazel was 18 months older than me and had it so much worse. Both foster parents did some terrible things to her so it is no wonder she ended up the way she did. Throughout childhood, she became a magnet for anyone who wanted to abuse a child. I looked

up to my big sister for what she had to cope with. It was like she went through much more trauma so that I did not have to.

Over the next decades, I went in and out of care and our sibling group was separated, living miles apart. The only thing that was consistent was my devotion and loyalty to my mum. I would not be brainwashed into thinking I should live a life without her. I would run away at every opportunity to find her. When I did find her, she would be busy addicted to heroin and doing all she could for her next fix. There were always people around leeching off her as the breadwinner who was selling her body. I would go out and hide in trees, watching her to make sure she was safe.

By the time we were all united in Devon, I had moved hundreds of times but this move was no different. It was still chaos, there were lots of drugs and alcohol, domestic violence and a whole load of other trauma. My mum was the master manipulator. She would drop us off at social services and blackmail them for money by threatening to leave us in the office. Most times it would work but I went into at least two more foster homes and one children's home before finally leaving care at the age of 16 years and moving into my first flat.

Hazel died in 2008. Prior to dying, her children went into care for the second time with a plan to split them up, the youngest to be adopted, and the oldest to go into long-term fostering. Hazel could never trust social services and hated them with a passion. Every time she was around them, she was

triggered. She did not trust them and felt they were always patronising. Their approach reminded me of how I felt when I was in care. Hazel's response was just like my mum's. I loved my mum so much and wanted to be with her. Privately, in the children's home, I would cry myself to sleep, yearning for her. She sent me a letter saying she loved me which I read almost every night.

But all I really wanted was for her to get off the drugs and be *our mum*. I did not want anyone else. I wanted her to make us dinner where we could be a normal family and sit at the table, where we would have food in the cupboards and not be hungry. The pain from hunger is something no child should ever have to bear. I was intensely jealous of other children in my school who had normal lives. I would spy them in C&A buying their school uniform with their parents whilst I was with my key worker wearing a lanyard signalling '*He is not my child, he's in care*'. All I wanted was my family.

I remember my primary school teacher inviting me to her house for dinner. It was all posh and everyone sat at the table to eat. There were no random people in the house '*goofing*' on heroin. It was clean and tidy and smelt fresh with plenty of light. Back then, I went by my first name, Norman but in the children's home, I was Terry. All I wanted was that kind of life with my own mum and years later, why could they not help Hazel?

The Intergenerational Impact of Care Experience

Trauma is passed through the generations. Many care-experienced

people go on to have children that also go into care. James [my brother] and Hazel [my sister] both lost their children to the care system.

On the release of a recent study, Dr Sam Parsons [UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies] said: *This is the first study to UK to show that the emotional scars associated with growing up in care are passed down through generations. Care leavers and their children were at greater risk of mental health problems, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. Their children also experienced higher levels of behavioural problems, self-harm and suicidal intent. With most care leavers suffering deep and persistent inequalities, nevertheless, more than a quarter beat the odds to succeed in school, at work and in family life*'.

If social services had really cared about me, they would have helped my mum through drug support teams, therapists, housing and the courts, to get out of the hole she was in. However, there was no genuine interest in her and she was left at the mercy of pimps and gangsters. She remained at the centre of our family and my thoughts as I languished in the care system.

The same lack of insight and co-ordination for those in authority was also inflicted on Hazel. That was the attitude we promised to change. Everyone sat in their silos and never connected the dots. We have lacked the potential to bring it all together and make systemic change for care-experienced people until now.

Why Care Experience should be a Protected Characteristic

I believe humanity is at a juncture where change is happening. Provided we catch this wave of potential and ensure that it has real impact, we will all benefit as a society. People will suffer less and the world will be a much better place for our children.

Granting protected characteristic status to care-experienced people can have far-reaching implications. The Equality Impact Assessment is a requirement of the Equality Act 2010. Whenever a decision is being made or a service designed, there is a public sector duty to have *due regard* for those with a protected characteristic. This well-established process for public authorities checks the design against impact. It also looks at common threads across different characteristics to understand what can be done where those with protected characteristics are disproportionately represented and suffering adverse outcomes.

My hypothesis is that when care experience is added to other characteristics such as age, disability, race, gender reassignment, marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation, assessments will start to uncover the practices and barriers which for generations have disadvantaged individuals such as my own relatives. Unlike my mum and sister, I am not angry anymore. I am calm and objective and see this as an awakening for those who don't know we exist. When decision makers are forced to consider us, they will hear our voice and reflect on our experiences,

realising we are not three-legged, two-headed monsters. They will see us as people who through no fault of our own, ended up being looked after by the state as a corporate parent.

It is important to distinguish between an *experience* and a factor that is experienced from a standpoint that is beyond an individual's control. Care experience falls into the latter category. It is something that cannot ever be changed by the child involved. It is a legal definition separate from any adversity attached to it. The key ingredient to the change we seek is how we mitigate against the adverse impact of systemic failures in the care system. The aim must be to tackle the silo mentality and encourage partnership between all the stakeholders involved.

The Role of Equality Impact Assessments [EIA]

In the *Supported Housing [Regulatory Oversight] Act* consultation, the Government stated: *An Impact Assessment has not been prepared for this consultation. An Impact Assessment will be prepared for the regulations and be informed by responses to this consultation.*

Equality Impact Assessments should be carried out at the scoping stage of any planned reform. Care Review quotes – *many care-experienced people face discrimination, stigma and prejudice in their day-to-day lives. Public perceptions of the care experience centres on the idea that children are irredeemably damaged and that can lead to discrimination and assumptions being made. One young person told the Review that a teacher had told*

them "...you are too smart for a kid in care". Another young person said "I don't want people to point out that I am in care if I don't want it mentioned. It makes me cross – that shouldn't happen".

This stigma and discrimination can be explicit and often comes with assumptions about the likely characteristics of children and adults that have care experience. It can lead to prejudicial discussion in schools, workplaces and through the media. At its worst, this can lead to care-experienced people being refused employment, failing to succeed in education or facing unfair judgements about their ability to parent children of their own.

Indirect Discrimination in Housing & Planning

A recent application by a care provider was overwhelmed by a community campaign against the granting of permission to open a residential home. This was at the Certificate for Approval Regulation stage rather than any need for permission per se. The real significance of this process is that details of the address of prospective residential homes are made known as deemed to be in the public interest. Many would have been approved and gone unnoticed if the regulation process had been kept confidential. If care experience was a protected characteristic, revealing this information would be discriminatory and not allowed.

It takes on average 15 months to create a children's home because of the bureaucracy involved. Smaller

local providers cannot afford the cost of paying staff in empty homes making them easy prey for corporates who average £33,000 per year profit on each accommodated child. Many councils are paying up to £1,000,000 per year to accommodate a single child.

The current planning system perpetuates stigma and discrimination towards care experienced individuals. It encourages the expression of negative and unfounded beliefs which deepens feelings of marginalisation and unworthiness for care-experienced people within society. Here are some examples of discriminatory statements made in objections to these applications for a Certificate of Lawfulness – [1] *The presence of children from the care system will lower the value of our properties and increase crime rates in the area.* [2] *Whilst I take into consideration that help /need is required for children /teenagers /adults, I do not feel the proposed plans /location of such a dwelling is geographically suited. This is a sought-after residential area which has a good community spirit and I believe such a place would create tension /animosity within the community. On this basis, I cannot see any positive impact, purely a negative one.* [3] *Children from children's homes are prone to antisocial behaviour and will disturb the peace in our community.* [4] *We do not want our neighbourhood associated with troubled kids. It will ruin the character of our community.* [5] *The house resides immediately adjacent to a playing field for young children. In addition to football, tennis, cricket and rounders, my children learnt to ride bikes on this*

field in the summer months. Again, is it really suitable? [6] The proposal is inappropriate as this is a residential estate housing families with young children and with no amenities. These will be troubled young people; it is setting them up to fail. The risk of them absconding is great and nearby transport links would enable them to get anywhere easily. [7] Looking at the number of objections, these vulnerable young people will not be welcomed into the community. Perhaps the applicant should consider a more appropriate location for this kind of development. [8] I know these kids need somewhere to stay, but surely not in the middle of a residential area.

The reality is that many planning authorities interpret the Town & Planning Act, and the Permitted Development Rules to mean that small children's homes do not need planning permission. However, the intricacies within the approval process leads to barriers, creating conditions for discrimination against those people with care experience. This would not be the case if it was a *protected characteristic* within the Equality Act.

Systemic Issues in Education & Housing

Children looked after by the local authority are prioritised on applications for school places, but this does not take account of the lack of a stable home situation. It often leads to those with care experience having to accept what's left of school places after the deadlines for admission. This usually leads to long journeys between placement and school, leading to the breakdown of established friendship links.

SHELTER evidenced to court that landlords and letting agents who advertise properties with the words 'No Benefits' were indirectly discriminating against women. This was because women are more likely to be on benefits. On the same basis, care-experienced people are often unable to rely on parents to act as rent guarantors. This landlord practice would become illegal if care experience became a protected characteristic.

The Children & Social Work Act 2018 directed councils to create local provision for their care leavers. This has led to a postcode lottery and downward social mobility for many as they are placed outside their local authority area with this fragile scaffolding of support removed when they reach 18 years. These care leavers may not have access to social housing, exemptions from council tax, free leisure or other benefits in the same way as peers sharing the locality.

The Impact of Council Resolutions

I have been conducting a campaign to persuade councils to adopt care experience as a protected characteristic. The campaign covers England, Scotland and Wales as a non-devolved issue, leaving the Care Review recommending that central government consult with devolved nations. I have been travelling up and down Great Britain, addressing councils and pushing for this motion to be adopted. At the point of writing this article, we are at 110 councils. The first ten to pass the motion were Cumberland, Westmorland and Furness, Ashfield District Council, Manchester, Redcar and Cleveland,

Southend-on-Sea Council, Edinburgh, Wigan, Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole Council, and Nottingham.

Those councils which have adopted the motions are agreeing to include care experience within their Equality Impact Assessments. The first two councils to adopt this motion were shadow councils at the time. They were newly formed councils replacing Cumbria County Council and its districts, creating an opportunity to see how this will be embedded from the start. This is an approach with the potential to give real meaning and offer the prospect of more optimal outcomes for care-experienced people.

Next Steps – Moving Towards Policy Change

In December 2024, we created a cross-party group in Westminster and planned to have meetings every 3 – 4 months with the first meeting starting in May 2025. These meetings will bring together the councils that have passed motions to share what they have done so far, to share best practice and discuss the social, fiscal and economic impact of making the care experience a protected characteristic.

Since passing motions to this effect, many councils have been slow to progress, with some not adding care experience to their Equity Impact Assessment. The Westminster Group is chaired by care experienced MP's, with most of the Group from areas that have passed the motion. They will be best placed to set the agenda for change and bring local authorities to account on its impact. The intention is to identify indirect discrimination within

policies and bring this to the parliamentary group to find solutions together with a breakdown of social, economic and fiscal benefits.

Last year we lobbied Sir Kier Starmer to introduce an exemption for care leavers to local connection requirements for better access to social housing. Many care leavers are placed out of their home local authority areas and must find the resilience to build up new lives and relationships which should, after all, be an inspiration of the care system.

Our draft Statutory Instrument reached the current government, and the Prime Minister announced proposed changes in his last party conference speech. However, whilst this is welcome, the changes have not yet been implemented. The formation of the Westminster Group will enable us to ensure that MPs of all parties have access to case studies, draft policies and social, economic and fiscal costs linked to specific actions. It will make the care experience less likely to yield the kind of adverse outcomes it does currently.

We are hopeful of effecting some change at a policy level through amendments we are seeking to the *Children's Wellbeing & Schools Bill* which is currently being considered by the House of Lords. The Bill sets out how public bodies should support looked-after children and care leavers. In Clause 21, local authorities are required to 'be alert' to issues that might affect young people's wellbeing. In our view, this wording is too weak as it does not require action. If our proposed amendments are accepted, a local

authority would need to *'take reasonable steps to avoid, reduce or otherwise mitigate any adverse impact of its policies and practices on looked-after children and relevant young persons'*. Instead of just noticing risks, councils would need to consider and respond to them – helping to ensure that care-experienced young people are genuinely prioritised across all services.

A Practical Illustration - Stacey

Invest to Save has been around for decades. We all know that spending on crisis interventions is never the most cost-efficient way to use public money. To illustrate this point, I have set out in the table below an example of a care leaver called Stacey. I have contrasted the two paths her life could take from the age of 18 years – one under the current system, and one under the system I am proposing.

Under my proposed system, various interventions are available to Stacey: mentoring, a jobs programme, and a partnership scheme between landlords and tenants to help with furnishing and decorating properties. Consequently, her 3-year life trajectory from the age of 18 years is significantly changed. She comes off benefits within a year, obtains a job, and has a much healthier lifestyle. She can contribute more to society by becoming less dependent on state finances. Stacey's journey on this pathway costs £37,444 over 3 years as opposed to a total estimated cost of £232,946 on the current system pathway [without the interventions].

In this example, the targeted interventions were worked out by

Stacey's housing association as a result of going through the stages of an Equity Impact Assessment. This was, in turn, informed by the voices of care experienced people who are inevitably and disproportionately represented in anti-social behaviour and eviction statistics.

The first point to make here is that this housing association may have been trying to reduce anti-social behaviour and evictions for many years without realising that care-experienced people were over-represented in the statistics. There was no previous requirement to look at this equation of inequality.

The second point to make is the one of silos working which is evident right across public sector spending. Without seeing the bigger picture across government departments, the opportunity to make significant savings for the taxpayer will be missed. In this case study, the three interventions to change trajectory for Stacey will cost £10,400 but the saving on the housing association is only £6,812 [cost of complex eviction] leaving a deficit of £3,588. On that basis, the housing association is very unlikely to consider this course of action. As a result, Stacey will not receive the interventions at the point when they are most needed to have the greatest impact on her life. Her three-year trajectory from the age of 18 years will cost the state £232,946 and she will, nevertheless, be homeless, jobless, vulnerable, and not in control of her life.

We have known for years that earlier interventions reduce costs. We now have the technology to make links between stakeholders, and account

for the outcomes of public money expenditure. Care-experienced people are over-represented within the criminal and civil justice systems, the Department of Works & Pensions, homelessness, and mental health services. Departments are spending significant amounts of money without monitoring its impact on the quality of life for those involved.

The table below represents the complex pattern of government departments with their own inputs, targets, policies and procedures which often overlap in terms of the goals they hope to achieve. This way of working has been going on for years. Artificial Intelligence [AI] now has the potential to help policy makers connect the dots in ways that were not previously possible. The cross-party group intends to assist public bodies with AI tools to streamline Equality Impact Assessments. It will signpost service providers and users to the most targeted and most cost-effective way of meeting needs.

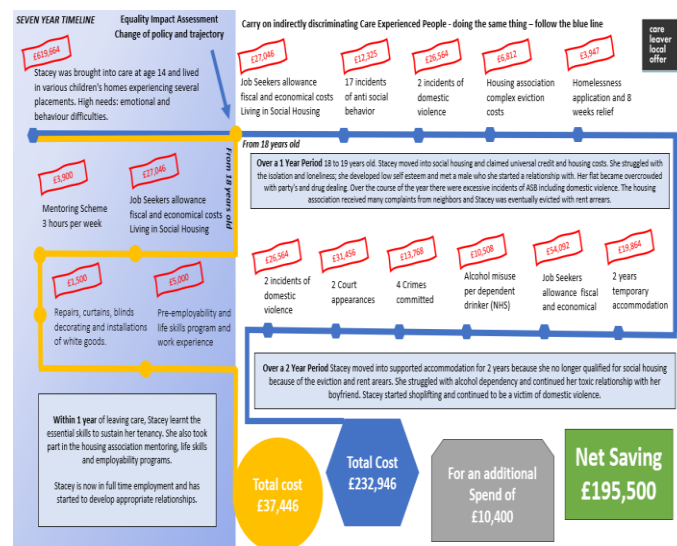
From the table below, you can see that Stacey's journey cost the DWP £27,046 per year. However, if the DWP and the housing association worked together whereby the DWP contributed £8,900 to the mentoring and jobs programme and the remaining £1,500 came from the housing association to deliver decorating services, it would become more fiscally viable. Between the ages of 18–21 years, Stacey's costs to the DWP are £81,138. If instead, they contribute £8,900 to the interventions and Stacey starts working, after a year there would be a saving £45,192.

The DWP's current work programmes for young people were created without a focus on care experience. There would have been more awareness of care-experienced people being disproportionately and adversely represented in their data had it been a protected characteristics within the Equality Act. There are many areas in the legislation and public policy where this approach would change the way decisions are made.

I agree with Josh when he says, *'the disadvantage faced by the care-experienced community should be the civil rights issue of our time'*. Moreover, since starting this campaign, I have come to realise this issue is far bigger than the care experience. These interventions and new ways of perceiving and responding to situations will impact on everyone. All boats will rise.

See below- *please zoom-in to read.*

Illustration of the impact of early intervention in a care leaver's life with positive results for the individual and significant savings for the state.



Note [1] –

<https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/research/research-cost=benefit-analysis/>

Terry Galloway is a passionate advocate for care-experienced young people, driven by his own lived-experience. He champions transitional pathways into education, housing and employment as a foundation for long-term success. He is a member of the board of trustees of 'Gold from the Stone Foundation' and NYAS [National Youth Advocacy Service]. He is the co-founder of the 'Care Leaver Local Offer', a national initiative aimed at improving support for young people leaving care.

Reforming Post-Adoption Contact: The Potential of Lifelong Links in Strengthening Birth Family Connections

Savannah Burney & Nicola Lines

Family Rights Group is a leading specialist child welfare charity dedicated to ensuring children can live safely and thrive within their families, while also strengthening the family and community connections of those unable to remain at home. This article examines how the charities innovative Lifelong Links approach – designed to build enduring connections for children in care – can be adapted to benefit adopted children and their families within the evolving context of post-adoption contact reform.

Adoption & Contact

Research highlights that safe, face-to-face contact¹ with birth relatives plays a crucial role in enhancing adopted children's sense of identity, emotional well-being and understanding of their adoption.² While the *Adoption & Children Act 2002* and the *Children & Families Act 2014* established a legal framework for post-adoption contact, orders for contact are rarely made. Instead, letterbox contact – typically an exchange of written updates once or twice a year – remains the most common post-adoption contact plan for children and their birth families.

These arrangements are often made during emotionally tense legal proceedings with little flexibility for future adjustments and often dictated by inconsistent 'rules' that do not reflect the wishes of the birth parent or

child. For example, birth mother's speaking to Family Rights Group described how they were told they could not 'show emotion or love' in letters. Some spoke of letters arriving late or not at all. Letterbox contact is mainly used for exchanging information, but it rarely helps meaningful relationships and often fades by middle childhood.

This approach increasingly contradicts the growing body of evidence underscoring the benefits of birth-family contact, including with siblings, for adopted children. In a recent report, The President of the Family Division of the High Court's Public Law Working Group [PLWG] on Adoption, with significant input from Family Rights Group, described the current system as 'outdated', advocating for a fundamental shift in practice. The Group's recommendations promote an individual approach that prioritises face-to-face contact with birth relatives, including siblings, when it is safe and aligns with the child's best interests.³

Post Adoption Contact: Current Challenges & the Need for Reform

Research suggests a growing recognition for the benefits of direct contact, with one-third of adoptive families maintaining direct contact with a birth relative in 2023, up from 22% in 2018.⁴ Most direct contact remains informal, particularly among siblings, with only 4% involving wider family.⁵ This highlights the often-overlooked significance of extended relatives such as grandparents in the lives of adoptive children, even where contact with their birth parents is not consistent with their welfare.

Many adoptive parents report positive experiences with direct contact while also raising the importance of support in overall outcomes. Notably, fewer than half of adoptive family's report feeling adequately supported with contact arrangements, which threatens to compromise the quality, and sustainability of future interactions.⁶ This is significant given that many adoptive children eventually seek information about their birth parents, and in the absence of effective arrangements, are likely to initiate contact – especially during their teenage years- via social media, which can lead to distressing and even harmful situations.⁷

As post-adoption contact, both direct and indirect, become more frequent, ensuring adequate support for all involved will be crucial to make these arrangements lasting, meaningful and positive. This need is reflected in the PLWG's recommendations for a well-supported and structured approach to post-adoption contact that is adaptable and responsive to a child's evolving needs throughout their life. The report highlights Lifelong Links, developed by Family Rights Group, as a promising model within this sphere for improving long-term relational stability for adopted children.

Lifelong Links: Building sustainable connections for children & young people

Lifelong Links was developed by Family Rights Group in response to the 2013 Care Enquiry which highlighted that the care system often breaks rather than builds relationships for children. It was designed in collaboration with care-experienced young people,

families, practitioners, and foster carers. The process, which is led by the child and goes at their pace, involves the child identifying who is important to them. An independent co-ordinator uses a range of bespoke methods to find and meet with significant people in the child's life [this could be relatives and others who care about them, such as a former foster carer or school - friend's mother] and bring them together at a celebratory Lifelong Links family group conference, to develop a lasting support plan with and for the child.

Evaluations show that Lifelong Links strengthens children's sense of identity, enhances stability in their living arrangements, and improves mental health outcomes⁸. One young person who participated in Lifelong Links described how the model helped her *'mend and build bonds with relatives and adults like schoolteachers or social workers'*. She affectionately refers to these trusted adults as her *'aunties'*, highlighting their commitment to offering advice, guidance, and emotional support – whether through assisting with financial applications or providing a sense of stability. Forty-one local authorities in the UK now have a Lifelong Links service.

Family Rights Group, funded by Adoption England has now adapted the Lifelong Links model for adopted children. It seeks to offer safe, structured contact between adopted children and their birth relatives, in line with the child's wishes and the support of their adoptive parents. Developed in collaboration with adoptive parents, adoptees, birth families, legal professionals, and social care

practitioners, the model – along with the necessary guidance, training, and resources for its implementation – was refined in partnership with practitioners from regional adoption agencies and Lifelong Links services across four pilot areas.

The adapted model responds to key insights shared by those with direct experience of adoption. Adopted young people, birth and adopted parents showed enthusiasm for Lifelong Links in the context of enabling direct post-adoption contact, welcoming the role of the independent co-ordinator in mediating a complex, highly emotional process. Young people in particular placed importance on leading the process whilst also having a choice about who they wanted to have contact with, or what information they wanted to learn, and in what way. They identified that the approach could also allow adopted children to build relationships with previous foster carers, neighbours and friends, all meaningful relationships that are often lost.

Adopted young people, birth and adoptive parents emphasised the critical need for specialist, tailored, and ongoing support to navigate potentially unpredictable and distressing interactions or information. For instance, one young person described the profound emotional impact of discovering that a family member had died, while birth parents expressed concerns that contact could evoke a recurring sense of grief and loss. The Lifelong Links adoption model addresses these complexities by incorporating individualised support alongside safeguarding considerations

for the child from the initial planning stage onward. Practitioners are encouraged to ensure all birth relatives can access the Birth Families Map, developed and hosted by Family Rights Group, with details of support and information services available to birth families, including counselling, therapy, and support with contact.

Evaluating the Impact of Lifelong Links in Adoption

A trial phase, launched in September 2024, is currently underway in Coventry, Northeast Lincolnshire, Hertfordshire, and Tower Hamlets, involving ten adopted children and young people participating in the Lifelong Links programme. The University of Sussex is conducting an independent evaluation to assess the initiatives impact. The findings will provide valuable insights to inform future guidance and recommendations for expanding Lifelong Links to a broader cohort of adopted children.

Conclusion

Traditional post-adoption contact, especially letterbox contact, often falls short in supporting lasting, safe relationships. While direct contact offers greater potential benefits, its effectiveness hinges on ensuring child safety and providing structured support to address challenges faced by children and their adoptive and birth families. Lifelong Links presents a promising, relationship-focussed alternative that prioritises identity, well-being, and stability for adopted children.

Savannah Burney [Social Work Policy Maker] and Nicola Lines [Practice Adviser].

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¹ This article uses the word 'contact' as an umbrella term and in line with the PLWG on Adoption's Report. Family Rights Group acknowledges that there has been a shift in the use of language relating to keeping in touch and maintaining important relationships with people who matter to a child.

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Support Through Court – supporting litigants in person in the Family Court

Rob Downs

More people than ever before are facing proceedings in the Family Court alone as Litigants in Person [LiP]. Court applications are often complex and especially daunting for those who, for whatever reason, struggle to express themselves clearly, verbally and in writing. Alone in Court, someone without representation can feel confused, intimidated and isolated by legal professionals and social workers leading to frustration and a feeling that the *'whole system is now against me'*.

The Law Society describes the rising number of LiPs against a backdrop of justice system cuts as having created a perfect storm in the Family Court where cases are extended and delayed resulting in additional distress for parents and ultimately, their children.¹

Support Through Court is a charity that assists people going through the family and civil courts without representation. We have offices in both courts and universities, and also provide remote services across England and Wales. In this article, Rob Downs, who has volunteered at the Manchester Civil Justice Centre since 2018, reflects on his experience of supporting people through the Family Courts.

Litigants in Person

The Legal Aid, Sentencing & Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 [LASPO] removed legal aid from nearly all private law cases. In the time since the Act, the proportion of parties with

legal aid representation has fallen from 73% to 40% for applicants and 50% to 20% for respondents.² These figures significantly overstate the level of representation in court as many people who have a solicitor for the initial application cannot afford to maintain legal representation through a series of hearings.

Litigant in Person is the legal term for unrepresented parties in legal proceedings as they constitute the majority of parents attending the Family Court. Any parent would find a child arrangements hearing an emotional and stressful experience. Many of our clients are disadvantaged by poverty, health issues, education and English language ability. Drug and alcohol abuse can exacerbate already difficult domestic situations. Without legal advice, in a confusing system, parents can easily make mistakes in their applications leading to further upset and wasted court time. The parties are naturally in conflict and, without guidance, it is difficult for them to submit to a mediated solution.

Cases that include allegations of domestic abuse [DA] or child safeguarding issues can involve multiple hearings and reports which takes a toll on the mental health of the parents who can feel more and more isolated; victims of a system that is not recognising the particular needs of their family situation.

Child Arrangements

We support clients making C100 applications for child arrangements [about both living arrangements and contact], Specific Issues [e.g. school, name change] and Prohibited Steps

[e.g. taking children abroad]. The form needs to be carefully completed otherwise it will be returned by the court, delaying the process. We give space for the client to discuss their concerns and help them express their aims in writing. We do not provide legal advice, but we do enable access to justice by describing the options available and signposting to advice services as required. Reminding clients that the best interests of the children are paramount can often help them focus on fairer and more practical arrangements.

Support Through Court volunteers have permission to accompany clients into private hearings. We are not their legal representatives and cannot speak for a client but we can assist with the document bundle, take notes and quietly explain terminology.

As cases progress, we can help clients with interpreting reports from Cafcass and preparing position statements, witness statements and responses. We help clients understand instructions from the court and debrief after hearings.

Unfortunately, we have seen ulterior aims behind a C100 application. Abusive ex-partners may be looking to exert further control over the family and finances. Other applications are motivated by improving housing entitlement or immigration status. We can provide emotional support by listening to our clients' concerns and help ensure that practical measures like interpreters, screens and separate waiting rooms are provided by the court. When appropriate, we will signpost clients to other organisations

that can advise on DA, debt, housing, etc.

Pre-hearing discussions with the other sides solicitor are useful to explore possible agreements or at least clarify and narrow the issues. These meetings can set the tone for a more collaborative way forward. However, someone without representation will often feel too overwhelmed and intimidated to participate. Our presence can give confidence and help them focus on facing and resolving the differences.

The LiP may also be directed to have pre-hearing discussions with Cafcass especially if a Section 7 report has been prepared. Parents are often frustrated by the amount of time that has been taken and perceived inaccuracies and /or bias in the report. We can guide our client to engage positively with the Cafcass officer and focus on the report's recommendations which are likely to inform the court's decision.

Non-molestation

Harassment from an ex-partner is a common and distressing form of domestic abuse. A Non-Molestation Order [NMO] typically restrains the perpetrator from approaching the victim, contacting them by any means and excluding them from the victim's home and workplace. In theory, legal aid is available to victims of DA. In practice, it can be hard for a victim to sufficiently evidence the harassment, and a solicitor might not be available for an urgent application. Victims of DA are often living in difficult, even chaotic domestic situations which results in missed appointments leading to legal

aid being denied or withdrawn. A NMO application requires at least two forms and a witness statement which even with our help takes well over an hour.

We also support respondents in NMO proceedings. Most NMO applications are 'without notice' to avoid the risk of the perpetrator intensifying their abusive behaviour, possibly putting the victim in danger. The respondent is often surprised and angry when an order has been imposed without them having the chance to provide a defence against what they see as baseless and exaggerated accusations. In this case, it is important that the respondent is prepared and focussed for the subsequent confirmation hearing and has prepared any statements and evidence.

Priti's story

Priti was terrified at the prospect of facing her 'ex' in court and contacted Support Through Court. We helped Priti arrange screens for the hearing and accompanied her into court.

Priti separated from her husband two years ago after suffering abuse during their marriage. She lives with their two children. The divorce is acrimonious with a contested financial order ongoing, and Priti is concerned that she and the children will ultimately be forced to leave the family home. The father has had only occasional contact with the children but has recently made a C100 application for contact. Priti feels that his application is motivated by desire to exert continuing control over the family as well as seeking to justify his claims on the house. Priti had a solicitor for the initial

stages of the divorce but cannot afford further representation. She has tried to get legal aid but has not been successful. The domestic abuse is largely historic and although she had twice called the police, no action was taken.

When Priti arrives at court, we sit her down in one of our meeting rooms and review the documentation for the hearing. We described the layout of the courtroom and how the screens will protect her. We explain that her husband's solicitor will probably speak first as it is his application. Then the judge will hear Priti's response and likely ask further questions of them both. Priti practices what she wants to say and we make a checklist of her points to take into court.

With these provisions, Priti is able to calmly answer the judge's questions fully and explain why she thought that contact should be restricted. Priti is directed to provide more detail on the DA that she suffered during the relationship and to provide a position statement within 14 days. We make another appointment to help Priti prepare and format these submissions correctly. The next hearing will consider whether more evidence will be required. Priti is now concerned that the proceedings are going to last for months but she is reassured that we are there to support her.

Matt's story

Matt had an on-off relationship with Mia over a few years. Mia has since had a baby who is now six months old. Last week, Matt was served with a Non-Molestation Order which was handed to him at his workplace. Matt was

referred to Support Through Court by the court staff on reception.

Matt arrives at court for the NMO confirmation hearing very angry at the fact that this order has been imposed on him without anyone hearing his side of the story. He said that he had just been trying to contact Mia. He does not know why she has shut him out of her life: their relationship was never straightforward, and her brother has been threatening him too. She would not reply to him so he had to go to her flat where she would not come to the door. He knows that the baby is his but he does not know whether his name is on the birth certificate. He is frustrated and anxious.

We listen to Matt and try to calm him down. There are now only thirty minutes until the hearing starts. We read through the order with him and explain the terms that have been imposed. Matt has a copy of Mia's statement which describes him bombarding her with messages and hammering on her door until the neighbours called the police. She suspects he was under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Matt has a history of drug use and a past conviction for violent behaviour. Matt says this is unfair as they both used drugs, and the conviction was unrelated to Mia.

We explain the court process and that the hearing today is his chance to defend against the order. So, his side will be heard but he needs to be calm and prepare. Matt says he accepts that their relationship is over, but he still wants to be part of the baby's life. We explain the options that might be presented today: he could accept or

contest the order or possibly give an undertaking to stop the harassing behaviour.

Mia has a legal aid solicitor who has asked to speak to Matt before the hearing. We accompany Matt to the meeting. The solicitor says that Mia has been frightened by his behaviour and just wants to be left alone. Matt again becomes frustrated, but we encourage him to focus on the options being presented to him. He is prepared to give an undertaking with the same provisions as the order. Matt will need to communicate about the baby, and we suggest they use 'AppClose' – a parenting app that takes the messaging outside of their usual channels. The judge agrees that Matt should give a formal undertaking and this is recorded in the order. This is a better result for Matt than a NMO which would have likely been confirmed if he had remained too angry to take part in the proceedings.

The child contact is not resolved and will have to be dealt with as a separate matter. Mia's solicitor indicates that any child contact would need to be supervised at least in the short term. We signpost Matt to mediation services, and he will return for our help if he needs to make a C100 application.

Notes on these stories

I have not presented real case histories. Proceedings of the Family Court are mostly private, and confidentiality is mandated. Instead, I have described typical client appointments that I might handle in a single day at *Support Through Court*. Both fictional clients will likely return for further support where

they will be assisted by a different volunteer.

How we help

At *Support Through Court*, we provide a safe space with volunteers who listen to each client's individual story. We help people to get their thoughts in order, problem-solve and decide next steps, source relevant and reliable legal information, explain complex procedures, complete court forms, and clearly present statements. Our practical and emotional support alleviates clients concerns about the complicated legal system.

Our partnership with legal clinics and third-sector organisations enables us to source complimentary specialist support for clients. For instance, we work with domestic abuse or homelessness charities. Our close work with HMCTS and the judiciary also enables us to provide a more holistic support system for people without representation. Through links to university departments, we also provide pro-bono experience to law students.

Clients can book appointments using our website and they are allocated on the day to an experienced volunteer, often shadowed by a student. We can only support in-person hearings at those courts where we have a physical office.

Any views expressed in this article are my own and not necessarily those of Support Through Court.

Rob Downs is a volunteer at Manchester Civil Justice Centre where the majority of his caseload involves supporting litigants in person in family

matters. He supports clients through their whole family court journey from initial applications to hearings and statements. The majority of family cases involve child contact and Non-Molestation Orders, but they also support Special Guardianship Order [SGO] applications. He frequently supports clients in their interactions with Cafcass and appreciates the crucial role that this service provides, witnessing the efforts made by Cafcass colleagues, often in challenging circumstances.

In addition to volunteering at the court, Rob has recently started writing articles for the Support Through Court blog and website.

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For Baby's Sake – an update

Amanda McIntyre, Head of Impact & Evaluation

For Baby's Sake is now 10 years old.

In April 2015, our charity - the *For Baby's Sake* Trust - launched its innovative programme which empowers parents to break cycles of domestic abuse and give their baby the best start in life, especially when the parents did not have that early experience themselves. Both parents join the programme during pregnancy whether or not they are together as a couple. They each have their own therapeutic counsellor and are supported up until their baby is aged two.

Mothers and fathers have made the most extraordinary changes in their lives and behaviours, for themselves and especially for their children. This article celebrates their achievements with five reflections, honouring evidence and insights that have informed or resonated with or emerged from the *For Baby's Sake* model of working with families. Hopefully, you will find learning or synergies to inform, encourage or support your work too.

'A child's experiences during the earliest years of life have a lasting impact on the architecture of the developing brain. Brains are built over time, from the bottom up, through an ongoing process that begins before birth. Brain architecture provides the foundation for all future learning, behaviour and health.' - Centre on the Developing Child – Harvard University, 2011.¹

Our founder, Stelio Stefanou, established our charity with a vision to protect babies at risk or experiencing harm and without a voice.

Early in our research, we were fortunate to meet infant mental health experts who shared the neuroscientific evidence: protecting babies means protecting their brain development. We had already decided to focus on tackling domestic abuse which was a prevalent theme in our stakeholder consultations and a review of safeguarding literature, identified as a risk in itself, was a barrier to reaching parents with support in relation to other safeguarding risks to babies, such as emotional neglect.

Influential scientific evidence included a longitudinal study published in 2012 which found that infants' exposure to domestic abuse during pregnancy and until the age of two has especially persistent effects on their cognitive functioning, visible in the data for children aged eight, with risks of long-term impacts on their life-chances [Bosquet Enlow et al, 2012²]. Research since then has found similar results. Evidence also highlights long-term impacts of domestic abuse on physical and mental health conditions.

Parents participating in *For Baby's Sake* embrace the neuroscientific evidence. Mothers and fathers find it useful to understand why they need to support their baby's brain development – and how to do this – especially because we share the evidence in a strengths-based, non-judgemental way. It motivates and guides our parents. As one parent said – *'Talking about brain development was helpful because*

most of those things I didn't know. You gave me lots of links and ideas and helped me to understand..... you helped me a lot with how to deal with babies' emotions especially'.

Sharing the science of early brain development and what shapes us

Institutions such as the Harvard Centre on the Developing Child have produced resources, concepts and imagery to communicate the neuroscience in user-friendly ways, using metaphors such as *brain architecture* or 'serve and return' [which describes the attuned, back-and-forth interactions that babies need].

It is wonderful to see Her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales and the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood³ now picking up this baton with their 'Shaping Us' framework and brilliant resources. The Centre's public perceptions survey 2024 found that 36% of UK adults report knowing just a little or nothing about how children develop in their early childhood and very few people [19%] recognise the unique importance of the 0-5 years period compared to other stages of life.

The *Shaping Us* Framework provides an accessible explanation of the emotional and social skills that matter most, how these can be developed at all stages of life and why it is so valuable to start developing them in children as early as possible, even while babies are in the womb.

The framework starts with explaining the security that comes from knowing ourselves [who we are as individuals] and then expands into the social and

emotional skills to manage our emotions and thoughts, communicate with and relate to others and explore the world around us.

As the *Shaping Us* campaign states – 'Our relationships, surroundings and circumstances during our first five years, shape the adults we become and the society we create. We all have a role to play in creating a healthier, happier society. It won't be an 'easy fix' – transformation never is. But together, we can change the world around children'.

Their parents had all made substantial changes before their children were six months old

'Young children suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm: Experiences on entering education'. Harriet Ward, Rebecca Brown & Debi Maskell-Brown; Centre for Child & Family Research, Loughborough University [2012].

This longitudinal research, commissioned by the Department of Educational, supported our theory of change and reinforced our resolve to create a programme that starts in pregnancy.

The Centre for Child and Family Research has been tracking a cohort of very young children living in ten different local authority areas who had been identified as suffering or likely to suffer, significant harm before they reached their first birthday. Earlier research had provided findings on their safeguarding and child development outcomes at age three when almost three-quarters of the sample appeared to be adequately safeguarded, either

living at home or having been permanently removed.

The research published in 2012 had traced the children for a further two years, to identify outcomes at age five. This found a less positive picture overall, including because a third of the children who seemed to be safe at home when aged three were *no longer safeguarded while living with birth parents*. In all of these cases, domestic abuse was the major factor: the child's mother was experiencing abuse from the child's father or a new partner.

Other concerning findings included high prevalences of emotional and social difficulties of children who had been at risk for most or all their young lives, encompassing severe difficulties warranting referral for clinical support.

For us, the key finding was the positive one – that there was a group of children who had been at risk as babies under one year, *'...who were living with parents who had been able to make significant changes to adverse behaviour patterns and had sustained them for five years. These children were considered to have been adequately safeguarded all, or almost all, of their lives: their parents had all made substantial changes before their children were six months old'*.

Breaking the cycle: intergenerational intervention

A programme like *For Baby's Sake*, starting in pregnancy, is prevention or early intervention for the unborn babies we support. It is 'earlier' intervention for the parents as this window to support families is missed all too often.

Yet, it is not truly 'early' for the parents who needed it when they were in the womb. As so many of our parents say, 'I wish *For Baby's Sake* had been around for my parents'.

85% of parents who engaged with *For Baby's Sake* in 2023 /2024 experienced four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACE]. These included emotional neglect in childhood, experienced by 81% of our parents. As a benchmark, an England population study on ACE's [Bellis, et al, 2014 ⁵] found that 9% of the population reported experiencing four or more ACE's.

Calls to shift public policy focus and resources from late response to early intervention or prevention are welcome, of course. However, as our parents' insight and experience has shown, public policy needs a narrative and strategy for intergenerational intervention.

This kind of intervention acts to prevent problems recurring, not from occurring in the first place. It requires deeper, more sustained and trauma-informed investment, embracing what it takes to empower parents to break the cycle and give their children a better start. A baby's first 1001 days, starting in pregnancy, is the optimum time to make this kind of investment. As parents working with us have said – *my son has had the best start of anyone in our family, as far back as anyone can remember – and that is not an accident*.

'For Baby's Sake needs to be everywhere. They have enabled us to have our daughter in our care, we still

cannot believe she is at home with us. They just sort of change your life, for the better. I wish we had *For Baby's Sake* years ago when we were in a different area, maybe then our other children would be with us'.

'Other interventions do not target the impact of Domestic Violence and Abuse in utero, or combine trauma-informed DVA support with attachment-focussed parenting support for both parents. These are key gaps that *For Baby's Sake* is addressing within this programme.' [2020] – Kings College London evaluation.⁶

The launch of *For Baby's Sake* in 2015 was accompanied by the launch of a major four-year evaluation of the programmes design, development and delivery from 2015 – 2019 which we had commissioned from Kings College, London. Published in 2020, the evaluation concluded that *For Baby's Sake* is the first known programme in the world to address previous limitations of whole-family responses to domestic abuse.

Key features include the programmes timing and its model of working safely and therapeutically with both parents, who each have their own *For Baby's Sake* therapeutic practitioner, underpinned by robust, whole-family safeguarding.

As the extract from the evaluation report shows, *For Baby's Sake* integrates support that has typically been fragmented or lacking and provides this for both parents: those experiencing domestic abuse and those using abusive behaviour.

When designing *For Baby's Sake*, we created the opportunity and conditions to innovate. We were determined not simply to glue together existing siloed practice; in supporting those experiencing domestic abuse; behaviour-change programmes for those using abusive behaviour; and infant mental health, the different aspects of the programme are mutually reinforcing thereby overcoming the gaps and tensions we had identified within siloed practice. The total whole of *For Baby's Sake* is 'worth more than the sum of its parts' to babies, parents, families and society.

As one parent participating in the evaluation told researchers – *the fact that it integrates everything – even if you're not together, it's about being able to co-parent your child, which is massive.*

Emotional regulation and the *For Baby's Sake* Theory of Change

Further academic research on *For Baby's Sake* has reinforced evidence for the value of supporting parents with regulating their own emotions and being able to support their children with this too. The paper published in *The Journal of Family Violence* – '*It's So Beneficial to Be Able to Break The Cycle*': Perceptions of Intergenerational Transmission of Violence and Parenting Practices Among Pregnant Women and their Abusive Partners [Taccini, Domoney et al; 2024]⁷ concluded – 'A key learning from *For Baby's Sake* is that interventions aimed at breaking the continuity of violence should focus on the development of emotion regulation strategies by participants, on strengthening participants self-

awareness, and their positive parenting practices'.

We have recently published a detailed *For Baby's Sake* theory of change which you can access from our website. It explains how the programmes content and ways of working creates effective change mechanisms to bring about outcomes for babies, children, parents [both those experiencing domestic abuse and those using abusive behaviour], families and society.

You will see clear alignment with the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's guidance on domestic abuse.⁸ This calls for services and strategies to be domestic abuse informed, trauma-informed, whole family and intersectional.

You will also see the prominence of two *For Baby's Sake* change mechanisms: the inner child work, which is the programmes trauma-informed therapeutic core, and the Video Interaction Guidance which is the central intervention to promote secure parent-infant attachment.

Three things are striking about inner-child work: the speed with which people change when they do this work; the depth of that change; and the power and creativity that result when the wounds of the past are healed – Homecoming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child: John Bradshaw [1990 and subsequent reprints]⁹

A decade on from when we launched *For Baby's Sake*, concepts such as trauma-informed care and trauma-

informed practice are now much more widely cited. Within domestic abuse services, the case for trauma-informed support has been advanced especially through listening to those with lived experience: *The need for trauma-informed interventions was our primary recommendation for the Commission looking at the experiences of women who had suffered abuse and neglect*.¹⁰ *For Baby's Sake* works because *trauma-informed practitioners give families the support to turn their lives around* – Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Chair, National Commission on Domestic and Sexual Violence and Multiple Disadvantage.

It is worth reminding ourselves what trauma is and the depth of its impact. A forensic psychiatrist Dr Gwen Adshead says – '*My definition of trauma is that it is the kind of suffering that pierces your defences and gets under your psychological skin*' – Dr Gwen Adshead, Four Questions about Violence [2024 Reeth Lectures].¹¹

Within *For Baby's Sake*, the therapeutic core of the trauma recovery journey is the *Inner Child* work. Dr Roxane Agnew-Davies, clinical psychologist and one of the co-designers of *For Baby's Sake*, introduced us to the steps of the journey to reclaim and champion your 'inner child', mapped out by John Bradshaw and created a *For Baby's Sake* approach, tailored to the needs of our families.

Transforming power of inner-child work within *For Baby's Sake*

From the earliest days of *For Baby's Sake*, parents have testified that being supported to take this journey has been transformational for them personally

and for their relationship with their baby.

I remember, almost ten years ago now, a father working with us who was finding it very difficult to cope with his baby's persistent crying. Initially, he relied heavily on using the emotional regulation strategies, provided in the early stabilisation phase of *For Baby's Sake*, to keep his baby safe. The deep transformation for him came once he did the inner child work, when he understood how his baby's crying had been triggering his own distress. He developed a new capacity to keep his inner child safe and soothe his baby for however long she cried. This is especially relevant to managing the safeguarding risks to babies under one year, identified in the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report – *The Myth of Invisible Men*¹² which cites *For Baby's Sake* as one of very notable programmes working with fathers.

Recently, Holly, a mother who completed *For Baby's Sake*, wrote a compelling blog¹³ which is published on our website. She describes the unhealed inner child as the part of us that is vulnerable, frightened, insecure, that stirs when we are provoked, immediately experiencing intense emotions that may seem irrational and usually trigger our *fight or flight* response.

As Holly says – ‘Above all else, our inner child is the fragile part of us that wants to be loved and appreciated, longing to receive the support and encouragement that he or she lacked as a child’.

Holly describes her inner child journey with *For Baby's Sake* – *Inner child work assists those who have experienced abuse by going back to basics – like learning to walk again mentally and emotionally. It gives us the opportunity to re-write the stories, ideas and new beliefs we want to adopt. From there, real positive change can take place, freeing us from influences of the past...And lastly, one of the more exciting elements of the inner child is exploring the fun and playful part of us that ‘growing up too quickly’ would not have allowed time and space for. Reminding myself of these facts and experiencing them with *For Baby's Sake* on my own inner child journey, helped me to powerfully connect with my unborn child and make empowered decisions. I was able to see the world through the eyes of a child and open my heart and mind again in a way I never imagined possible. Although I'm still learning how to become a better parent every day, my inner child healing has been invaluable in me embodying the kind of woman and mother I want to be. It has helped me break free from past hurts and step into a bigger, better and brighter future for my son and I’.*

‘We believe that people in troubled situations can find considerable inner strength once they see themselves in a different light’ – Hilary Kennedy, Video Interaction Guidance: A Relationship-Based Intervention to Promote Attunement, Empathy and Wellbeing; edited by Hilary Kennedy, Miriam Landor & Liz Todd [2011].¹⁴

For Baby's Sake integrates attachment-focussed and trauma-informed methodologies and this is especially

evident in how we use Video Interaction Guidance [VIG]. As one mother said – *‘During VIG and after watching the attachment videos, I started thinking about my own attachment to my parents, the impact and how I want my daughter to have a secure attachment to me’*.

When designing *For Baby’s Sake*, we were aware of the evidence from the Bakermans-Kranenberg meta-analysis of what works to support infant mental health [2003]¹⁵ which highlights the usefulness of video-based interventions to promote sensitive parent-child relationships.

We chose to use VIG because of its underpinning principles and how it is delivered. The therapeutic practitioner records a video of the parents and baby interacting, edits the film and plays back footage, showing micro-moments of the most attuned interaction between parent and baby. In a shared review of this footage, the therapeutic practitioner asks the parents the magical question – *‘what is it that you are doing that is making the difference’*.

Through this process of active engagement and reflection, parents become aware of, and build on, their skills in attuned, sensitive interaction with their baby. They also develop a curiosity and ability to mentalise or think about and understand both their own and their baby/s mental state.

The parents supported by *For Baby’s Sake* often doubt that their baby could love them or that they can give their baby what they need. VIG gives them emotionally moving evidence that

helps them to see their baby and themselves in a new light. As *For Baby’s Sake* parents have said – *‘The way I saw myself through the videos, I was so surprised at myself of how well I read like a normal person would, picking up a book and reading, using intonation. I now believe I have it in me to be a father – that soft and gentle person’*.

‘I had never looked at myself from such a perspective and the part I play. I’ve learnt that my daughter doing well is a mirror of how I am interacting with her’.

This learning and transformation is especially valuable within families where parents are working to break cycles of domestic abuse and give their baby the best start in life. In her third Reith Lecture asking – *‘does trauma lead to violence’*, Dr Gwen Adshead talks about babies in a way that resonates perfectly with the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood’s *Shaping Us Framework*: *Babies have to grow a relational mind, work out who they are as a person and who others are and especially who they can trust to get close to when they feel scared. Learning to manage painful emotions by getting close to someone and sharing your feelings as words is one of the most important tasks of early and late childhood but to do that, children need secure attachments to adults they can trust and don’t fear’*.

Empowering therapeutic relationships

Hilary Kennedy, joint CEO, Association for Video Interaction Guidance UK, emphasises in her book that VIG works by actively engaging people in their own change and learning, underpinned by values of respect and

empowerment. As Hilary Kennedy explains – VIG is a very effective way of putting these aspirations into practice. It gives professionals a way to move from either pole on the helping continuum of ‘advice giving’ to ‘therapeutic listening’ to finding a balance with each client where leading and following become a carefully crafted dance.

For Baby’s Sake Therapeutic Practitioners use trauma-informed motivational interviewing skills and sustain this ‘dance’ throughout their whole engagement with parents, right from the earliest encounter. Brenda Evans, Therapeutic Lead at the *For Baby’s Sake* Trust, says relationships heal relationships. Indeed, the relationship between each parent and their *For Baby’s Sake* Therapeutic Practitioner is the programme’s fundamental change mechanism.

As parents explain – ‘You didn’t tell me what I should think, you led me to figuring things out for myself by asking the right questions, you helped me explore myself’. **Mother.**

‘Without you discussing stuff with me I don’t think I would be the person I am today. I couldn’t imagine sitting here with anyone else’. **Father.**

Thank you from the bottom of my heart We’ve been extremely lucky to have you in our lives..... it’s honestly been life-changing... we wouldn’t have known how to be better people and parents so wouldn’t have made the changes without you’.

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Professional notes: Law & Research

Care-Experienced Young People & Higher Education.

Summary

Care-experienced young people in the UK are less likely to attend university than peers who have not been in care. This study sets out to find more about this situation, particularly the expectations care experienced young people held towards university attendance during the years leading up to university application and how these expectations changed over time. The study was also interested in care-experienced young people's experiences of applying to university and in their wellbeing and progress once there.

Objectives

The study wanted to answer the following questions –
[1] what expectations do care-experienced young people have in respect of going to university and how

do these change over time. [2] what influences care-experienced young people's expectations of applying to, and attending, university? [3] how can key care, education, and university stakeholders best support care-experienced young people in their consideration of, and application to university? [4] what support is needed for care-experienced young people once at university.

How we went about it

The study was carried out in two stages: The first stage consisted of analysis of *Next Steps*, an existing dataset following the progress of a cohort of over 15,000 English young people of who 231 were classified as either in-care or care-experienced at the start of the study. Within this, the study explored the expectations of care-experienced Year 9 pupils in relation to going to university, how these changed over time, and how they related to later involvement in higher education.

The second qualitative stage gained richer detail of care-experienced young people's expectations and attitudes to university and what influences over time. This stage used face-to-face interviews with six secondary school pupils, eleven care-experienced university students, and a focus-group attended by a mix of care-experienced young people – some of whom had been to university and some who had not.

Key Findings

The study confirmed that young people who were in care or care-experienced at 13–14 years of age had significantly lower expectations of attending university than peers who had not

entered care. These lower expectations remained even when other factors such as Special Education Need, school exclusions, and family benefit levels were taken into account. In addition, of all the young people who, when in Year 9 said they thought they were likely to apply for university, those who had care-experience were much less likely to be in higher education at age 20 years than those who had never been in care. This was true even when factors such as SEN, history of exclusions and family benefits were considered.

When speaking to care-experienced young people, the study found – [1] further evidence that the support care-experienced young people received from schools and carers, and the priority given by social workers to education were key influences on care-experienced young people's expectation of going to university. [2] some local authorities are not giving sufficient attention to young people's transition to university or wellbeing while there, with some findings that the support promised by local authorities did not materialise. [3] where universities provided good levels of support, they largely met care-experienced young people's needs, especially needs of a financial or emotional nature. This support reduced anxiety about going to university and made students feel better supported when there.

Implications

This report has a few clear implications. Firstly, although expectations for university are lower for care-experienced young people than their peers, this need not be the case and

many of these young people find their expectations lowering throughout their educational journey.

This fall must be arrested and the gap between the expectations and reality for these young people closed if we are to ensure that young people who have been in care have the same chances and opportunities in life as other young people.

It is also clear that the responsibility for this does not fall to one person within the child's life. The qualitative findings show that social workers, teachers, and higher education providers can all contribute to ensure that young people believe in themselves, in their chances for the future, and are given every tool and opportunity to achieve what they set out to do.

Next Steps

The research highlights that there are many individuals and organisations who can positively affect a young person's likelihood to attend university. We want to better understand what higher education providers, local authorities, charities and other organisations are doing to support care-experienced young people to access and succeed in higher education. *What Works for Children's Social Care*, in partnership with *Transforming Access & Student Outcomes in Higher Education* [TASO] has launched a call for evidence and practice from these groups to feed into a report to be published later this year.

Ban on unregulated experts in Family Courts proposed for England & Wales – March 2025

The Family Procedural Rule Committee has proposed changes requiring Court-appointed experts in family proceedings involving children to be regulated by a UK statutory body or registered with the Professional Standards Authority. The proposal addresses concerns about unqualified experts influencing critical child welfare decisions. While experts could still be used without regulation in exceptional circumstances, critics argue this loophole should be eliminated. The Association of Clinical Psychologists UK welcome the changes but believes they do not go far enough, whilst *Rights of Women* wants evidence from unregulated experts deemed inadmissible, especially in cases involving alienating behaviour. The public consultation ends 6th June 2025.

Correction –

With reference to an article in the Family Court Journal Vol 10 No 1 Summer Edition 2024, *'The treatment of children found to be harmed by parents in Private and Public Law'* by Karen Woodall, a request has been made to correct an assertion contained in that article that references a previous article in the Family Court Journal Vol 9 No 2 Winter Edition 2023 *'Failed by the Family Court'* by Dr Elizabeth Dalgarno, Dr Rima Hussein, and Ruth Dineen.

Ms Woodall writes on Pg 16 *'In March 2024, Family Law News published an article submitted by legal professionals that research and media reports about*

cases based on mothers who had self-reported fleeing from the UK with their children to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus due to fears of systemic failures in the UK Family Courts, had not always disclosed that findings of serious harm were made against them by the Family Court'.

The research study by the team at the University of Manchester **did not** contain any participants who had *'self-reported fleeing from the UK with their children to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus'*. Neither does the article in 'Family Law Week' state this. Furthermore, not all mothers who participated in the study had findings made against them in the Family Court. The article in 'Family Law Week' does not make this assertion either.

Book Review – *Small Things Like These* by Clare Keegan.

This book takes us along the troubled conscience of coalman Furlong in a small insular Irish town in the early sixties. Those of us of a certain age remember regular delivery men like these, briefly glimpsing into the reality of our daily lives. Our coalman would ask to use the toilet which always filled me with a mixture of anxiety and pride in my mum's standards of keeping the house clean and tidy.

Furlong is the hands-on boss of the local coal business and head of a large family of teenage girls. It is an era when the post-war liberal values start to clash with the iron fist of the Catholic church. The church's influence in such a community pervades every aspect of life. It is hard not to draw comparisons

with that portrayal of Orwell in 1984. The weather is dark and wet as the warm welcome glow of Christmas peers out from the windows of shops and homes. The strength of gossip and social isolation is a tangible reality for anyone who dares to point out the emperor has no clothes.

Furlong has suffered the loss of his mother as a child, but the memory of her is stitched together from snapshots of events he witnessed at the time. It left him feeling helpless and fearful of challenging the doctrine that children should accept the accounts of adults to maintain a facade of normalness to everyday life.

These memories are awakened as he becomes drawn into the plight of a young female at the convent who has taken to hiding in the coal shed. She is only one of many who have been forced to relinquish babies and work for meagre board and lodgings in the laundry. However, this girl reawakens a sense of injustice and feelings of paralysis.

Furlong is heavily reliant on the convent as a customer and when he raises what he is witnessing there to the nuns, he firstly becomes the target of veiled threats, and then of bribery to keep things to himself. Everyone should know their place and not step out of line. However, Furlong starts to draw comparisons between this girl and his own eldest daughter of the same age.

Furlong is under the greatest pressure from his wife to ignore what he is seeing there. The livelihood of the family could be at stake and the futures of their daughters. This book takes us on his

tremulous journey towards taking action that is compassionate and courageous but not without what are likely to be severe consequences for everyone involved.

Paul Walker

Bank Worker – Family Court Adviser

Letters to the Editor –

This is a new addition to the Journal that will provide an opportunity for open letters to be sent to the Editor for publication. Correspondence can be anonymous and refer to any relevant subject that the writer wishes to raise. See page [2] for editor contact details.

And finally.....

A poem –

Tree House

Next door they have a tree house that's
high above our heads,

It's higher than the fences and way above
the sheds.

Next door they have a tree house held up
with nails and string,

And lots of coloured ribbons and pennants
in a ring.

Next door they have a tree house and
sometimes when it blows,

It makes a scary creaky sound, like
someone murdering crows.

Next door they have a tree house which
can turn into a tent,

In case they're up a mountain, or in the
Orient.

Next door they have a tree house and
sometimes it's a boat.

That sails across the oceans and keeps
them all afloat.

Next door they have a tree house where
 friends can come and play,
 At soaring on a spaceship right through the
 milky way.
 Next door they have a tree house as big as
 big can be,
 Unless they want it very small, with just
 room for you and me.

Caroline Vero

A Musing.....



The Editorial Board invites anyone reading this Journal to make contact, submit an article, send in details of a case [redacted] or relevant experience, an interesting or controversial judgment, concerns about practice, or commentary relating to codes and conditions of service, positive or negative. Book or film reviews that link in some way to our role are always welcomed, news about meetings, lectures, seminars, or training courses can be of interest. Submissions can name the author, be anonymous

or sent as suggestions for the Editorial Board to undertake further research and create an article from the idea sent in. Anything submitted can be very brief or longer, serious, light-hearted, or even a quip. Cartoons are also welcomed.

The Family Court Journal is for all colleagues within Cafcass and further afield working with children and families, on the frontline or behind the scenes. The Journal strives to provide an interesting read that informs, educates, enthuses, entertains and most of all unites colleagues. It is also intended to stimulate new professional /Trade Union membership within Napo Family Court Section so please feel free to signpost /send a copy of the Journal in the hope that colleagues who have not yet become members will see that Napo is a credible, worthwhile, and focused union that works hard for the benefit of its membership.

The Family Court Journal needs to have a wide range of articles in each publication which will hopefully be produced at least biannually. However, this will only happen if sufficient material is received. The Editorial Board is doing its best to create articles, but it is hoped everyone will become equally invested. Time, commitment, and confidence are the key elements to creating a flow of ideas.