



# Don't judge – we're no different from you

A guide for school staff on supporting looked after children in schools



By the Young People's Organising and Campaigning (YPOC) Group  
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## Who are the YPOC Group?

We are a group of young people aged 12 and over, who are currently living in foster care, kinship care, residential care or have moved on from care. We call ourselves

the Young Peoples' Organising and Campaigning Group (YPOC) and we meet every four weeks.

## Why did we decide to run this campaign?

School is important for looked after children and young people. If we can do well at school we can do well in life. In "We are the Bairns" our Guide to Corporate Parenting, we said that "teachers and support staff have a very important role in helping looked after children make the most of their education."

We realised that it is important for teachers and support staff to know the challenges we might be facing and how that will affect our ability to learn. We also thought that it was important for other pupils to understand what it's like to be in care and that most of the time, we are not in care because we have done something bad.

## How did we go about it?

### Our own experiences

We began by looking at our own experiences of being in school and what kinds of things make it hard for us. This is what we said:

- Some teachers and school staff don't understand what it is like to be looked after
- Some teachers don't support you when you ask for help
- Teachers and rules 'Do what I say not what I do.'
- People think that if you're looked after you must have done something bad
- People make fun of you because you're looked after
- You can't tell people you're in care
- You feel different
- You have to miss school to get to meetings
- Sometimes you have to move schools
- Hard when you move schools, new rules and need to make new friends
- New rules to get used to in foster care too
- You lose friends when you have to move
- Sometimes you have to travel a long way to school
- If you have support needs or disabilities you can get picked on
- When you are 16 you have all the worries about leaving care
- Bullying then teachers blame you - don't understand
- Other things can be going on in your life that make it hard for you. Like if you're coming up to 16 and have to think about leaving care.

## What other looked after young people say

We then decided to ask other looked after children and young people about their experiences of school and what helps and what gets in the way. We sent out a questionnaire to all children who are looked after over 5 and we got back 48 replies.

14 of those who replied were of primary school age; 32 were of secondary school age and 2 had left school.

Of those who responded, most (20 out of 42) had only been in one placement.

13 had been in 2-4 placements and four have had 5-6 placements since they became looked after away from home. Five young people had had 9 or more placements. Some young people didn't answer that question.

Most of the children and young people responding had only been in one or two schools (31 out of 44). However 11 had had three different schools and two had had up to 11 changes of schools.

This is what the young people said:-



## Teachers

Most of those who replied to the question "How well do you think teachers understand what it means to be in care," (25 out of 41) said that they thought teachers did understand what it was like to be looked after to some extent. However

there were still 16 out of 41 who thought teachers didn't understand fully or not at all. The comments were very mixed and it seems as if some schools or teachers are very understanding but others not so much.

*"More support when being bullied."*

*"Teachers understand but some feel awkward speaking about it. They don't know how it feels as it is difficult to talk about."*

*"They listen to what I have to say."*

*"They kind of give you into trouble if you have a reason for your homework being late in, if you have a reason like 'it was too bad at the foster placement and you didn't have time' so they give you into trouble."*

*"For the few who knew, they understood. I only told a few, as they had to know (meetings etc.) I did not tell other teachers."*

*"Don't know how to explain it, they just don't get it."*

*"My teacher was very aware of my situation and asked me to type up my weekend news to check I was okay."*

*"They understand fully, and there is never any problems at all."*



## Other pupils

18 out of 40 young people thought that other pupils didn't understand what it means to be in care whilst the other 22 did think that other pupils understood. Some

said that the other pupils didn't know that they were in care. One or two said that they had friends who were in care too and that made it easier.

*"Most of the pupils in my Primary classes did not know what Foster Care was before they met me."*

*"I don't tell people because they would probably cause me problems."*

*"I rate five because it depends on why they are in care. Some people understand better than others. For those who do not understand, they will be told what it's like and how to understand."*

*"They just treat me the same."*

*"Because when I miss my family they always seem to understand what I'm going through, I have a few friends that are fostered too."*

*"They pick on you for being different."*

*"My friends are very understanding."*

*"They would not know how it feels if they haven't been through it themselves."*

*"My friend thinks it's just like staying in another friend's house."*

*"They make fun of you."*

*"Some children say hurtful things as they don't understand how it feels and sometimes bully you for being in care."*

*"They don't always know how hard it is."*



# What helps looked after children and young people get the most from school?

Most of the children and young people who replied talked about the importance of having teachers and support staff they can talk to when they are having problems. They value teachers who will listen to them and who will take steps to help them sort out their problems.

Other young people talked about the importance of getting support where they

live from their carers. And some spoke of the importance of having really good friends that they can talk to and trust.

A lot of the young people who replied talked about their Guidance Teacher and it is clear that where Guidance staff make a point of getting to know their looked after children and young people, it can make a big difference to how we do in school.

Some children also spoke about classroom assistants and saw them as having a really important role too.

*"They know who's in care but they think people in care are bad."*

*"I go to guidance when I have a problem."*

*"You need a solid foundation at home. If this falls through, then perhaps at school you also fail. You also need teachers to allow you more time, be less strict and 'special care'. Foster carers should be involved in the school, actively and physically."*

*"Teachers/class assistants help you when you would like some help."*

*"Some teachers help and are nice as they try to understand how it feels."*

*"Teachers help if we need it, you get explained how to do the task."*



*"I've had some trouble at school to do with friends and my pastoral care teacher is helping me by having a support worker that will go over things."*

*"I sometimes get angry and there is always a teacher that will take time to talk to me."*

*"Teachers help me. I have six amazing supportive friends."*

*"Good understanding guidance teacher. If the teachers know I'm struggling they give extra help and cut down the workload."*

*"Yes teachers will help me and talk to me if I get upset."*

*"Yes teacher does give me help."*

## Bullying

13 out of the 40 children who replied to this question said that they were or had been bullied at school. Most had someone who they could speak to in school or where they lived but a small number didn't feel they had anyone to turn to.

It is very important to us to be able to talk to someone if we are being bullied or picked on in school for any reason but especially if it is because we're in care. We should know who we can go to if this is happening and we should be able to trust them to sort it out.

*"More support when being bullied".*

*"Stop bullying/name calling and make a support group for kids in care."*

*"Help other people to not judge."*

*"Understand and don't give them a harder times as people that aren't in care."*



# What could schools do better to support looked after young people?

Some looked after children and young people told us that they do fine at school and were happy with things as they are. They didn't want special treatment or to be singled out because they were in care.

A number of others though wanted teachers and pupils to be more aware of what it's like to live away from home in foster care and other placements. They wanted teachers and other pupils to be helped not to judge us because we are in care. We are all different and all have different challenges, talents and abilities. It's important that teachers understand what we are having to deal with at different times.

Some young people also said that they felt teachers were harder on them because

they were in care so they thought it was important that this doesn't happen.

Some young people thought there should be the chance for more one to one time with teachers and guidance staff and more support if we are having problems, especially if we are being bullied and picked on. They thought it was important to listen to carers, social workers and to the children and young people themselves.

We also think that it's important to have a social worker who comes and sees you at the time when you need help and who actually listens to you.

One young person suggested having a support group in school for kids in care.

*"Learn/talk more about it with other pupils."*

*"Kids in care shouldn't get treated special, they shouldn't feel singled out because of the home situation."*

*"Make everyone aware of what it's like to be in foster care."*

*"Allow them more time with their guidance teacher. Take the pressure off the child, especially at exam period."*

*"Understand."*

*"Maybe make everyone aware of what foster care means."*

*"Listen to the social workers and carers."*



*"More teachers."*

*"Give me more 1 to 1 time with a teacher."*



## What else makes a difference?

How we get on at school is often affected by our experiences of being looked after like how well we get on with our carers and how settled we are in placement; if we have good family contact; and what other worries we have in life.

For some of us school is a chance to shine; to get away from our other worries and to make the most of our potential. Some of us like to blend in at school and we hate things that make us different. For others school is an added stress, especially if other things in our lives are not going well and we need a bit of understanding and extra support to manage better.

It is important that key school staff get to know us as individuals and know what helps us in school.



*"I like School and blend in there."*

*"It's a difficult situation to be in and not everyone understands what it's like."*

*"School is what you make of it, it's not for all. If you're left out 'home' is confused, so will your school work ends up in a mess. The child will perhaps get marked as the bad kid in foster care and it'll be carried for the duration of your school days. This is unless you have somebody to fight your corner. Maybe your guidance teacher/foster carer or children's rights officers."*

*"It is good that I was treated the same, but didn't like being taken out of School for social work meetings and this being on my report card as ABSENCE after 100% attendance since being in care."*

*"Not every child in foster care needs special attention."*

*"I'm lucky as I've only had one placement in six years."*

*"School was fine but some pupils did things to ruin my experience at school by picking on me and trying to piss me off and wouldn't leave me alone."*

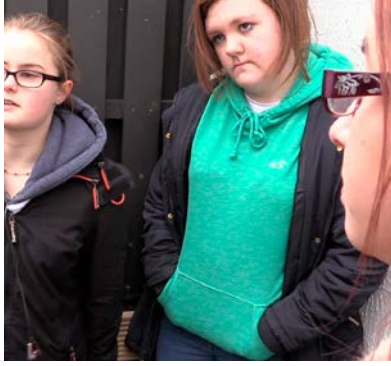
*"I agree, it's hard at first but after a while it gets better. You act different and feel different emotions at any one time like sadness and anger."*

*"Being in care has helped me become a better person. The person I am today and I'm in a place I feel safe and can actually manage school and do really well."*



## What we think should happen

1. We think that it would be good if teachers, school staff and other pupils understand what it's like to be looked after and the kinds of challenges we have to face. We want them to understand us and not to judge us just because we are in care.
2. We have made a DVD to explain the different reasons that kids come into care and all the things we have to deal with once we are in care. The DVD will tell people what makes things hard for us in school and what helps.
3. We think that every school should get a copy of the DVD and every teacher and pupil support assistant (PSA) should get to see it as part of their in-service training.
4. Every new teacher and PSA should get to see it as part of their induction.
5. Secondary school pupils should get to see it as part of their PSE.
6. All the councillors on the Education and Children's Services Committee and all senior managers in Education and Children's Services should get to see it.
7. We think it should be part of the induction when new councillors go on the Education and Children's Services Committee and when new senior managers come into post.
8. We think that guidance staff should get to know all their looked after children as individuals. If they can have a personal relationship with the young person and understand their experiences and what is going on in their life then they can properly support them in school.
9. We think that all looked after children should be able to ask to see their Guidance Teacher or another teacher they have a good relationship with on a one to one basis if they are struggling at school. We know teachers won't always be available right there and then but if we know when we can see them that will help.
10. Every school should have a safe place for kids in care to go to if they are having a bad day.
11. We think schools should check out with their looked after kids if they would like to meet as a group. Some will, some won't.
12. Social workers should be there to support young people when they need them.
13. School counsellors and school nurses can also be really helpful for looked after young people to speak to.



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