

SAFEGUARDING ADOLESCENTS

STRATEGY GUIDE

Theme: Children In Care (not including UASC)

Introduction

Adolescents are legally defined as children until they become adults when they reach 18 years of age. Children come into care for all sorts of reasons including abuse and neglect. These experiences can leave children with complex emotional and mental health needs, which increase their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

What is a looked after child?

The term 'looked after' refers to situations where the state acts as the legal guardian for a child. This includes:

Children and young people compulsorily removed from their family and placed in the care of the state.

Children placed in the care of the state on a voluntary basis.

Children placed in 'out of home care' such as with foster carers, in residential homes, young offenders or secure institutions or at boarding school.

Children residing with parents or other relatives but for whom the state is their legal guardian.

Children for whom the state no longer acts as legal guardian but who continue to receive interventions from the state because of the status of having been looked after – described in the UK as 'care leavers'

Facts and myth busting about children in care

- Social workers do not have the power to remove a child from their parent's care, unless this is ordered by the court or the parent or a carer with parental responsibility agrees that their child should be removed.
- A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a looked after child (LAC).
- Looked after children (LAC) are also often referred to as children in care (CIC) or children looked after (CLA).
- In situations where the children's court determines a child cannot be returned to a parent's care and there is no other family who can look after them voluntarily, children may be placed in care.
- Carers may be relatives or part of the child's network or may be unknown to the child.
- Children may enter care for all sorts of reasons, but many enter because they have experienced violence, abuse or neglect. These experiences can leave children with complex emotional and mental health needs, which can increase their vulnerability to abuse.
- Children who are looked after may have more emotional and mental health needs, as well as more behavioural difficulties than most children. Their difficulties usually start before they become looked after.
- Looked after children may experience multiple care placements.
- Placement breakdowns can have a detrimental impact on a child's emotional wellbeing and mental health. It can also prevent them forming stable relationships with the adults who could help protect them.
- Many looked after children display challenging behaviour and having problems forming secure relationships. Some find it hard to develop positive peer relationships. The care system can struggle to provide effective management and interventions to address these problems.
- Foster care is the most common placement type.
- Looked after children are more likely to go missing than their peers.
- Most children in care say that their experiences are good and that it was the right decision for them.
- Providing a secure, caring environment can help looked after children overcome their early life experiences.
- The most common reason for a child to leave care is to return to their family.

Many children move repeatedly in and out of care, or between placements. Placement breakdowns can have a detrimental impact on a child's emotional wellbeing, mental health, sense of belonging and the need to be accepted by friends and family and other significant groups. It can also prevent them forming stable relationships with the adults who could help protect them.



What is the impact on safeguarding adolescents?

Safeguarding adolescents who are care experienced

As children reach their teens, they can become more vulnerable to abuse or exploitation from outside their families. These threats might arise at school and other educational establishments, from within peer groups, or more widely from the wider community and online. Threats can take a variety of different forms and children can be vulnerable to multiple threats, including exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups such as county lines, trafficking, online abuse, sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation known as [contextual risk](#).

Many looked after children have previous experiences of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which can lead to them displaying challenging behaviour and having problems forming secure relationships. Some find it hard to develop positive peer relationships and this impacts on self-esteem and relationships as they transition to adulthood and beyond.

Looked after children are more likely to go missing than their peers and they may run away from care for all sorts of reasons. These include:

Wanting to return home to their family.

Being unhappy or bored in their care placement.

Feeling like they didn't have enough control over their own lives.

Children who are looked after in the care system are disproportionately likely to go missing (Yong, 2019). One in every ten looked after children will go missing compared to an estimated one in every two hundred children generally. They are also much more likely to be reported missing on multiple occasions. In 2020, nationally over 12,000 children who were looked after went missing in over 81,000 missing incidents. Nearly 65% of missing looked after children were reported missing more than once in 2020.

Evidence suggests that looked after children can be at increased risk of many of the harms known to be linked with going missing. It is therefore important that professionals and carers responsible for a child's care prioritise the response to children who go missing and know how and when to report an incident to the police. Some children who have experienced the instability of multiple placement moves, including a change in schools throughout their childhood, can have difficulty in forming significant, long lasting and

healthy attachments to peers. The repeated disruption of attachment to place and significant and trusted adults can impact on emotional well-being and prevent children from forming stable relationships with the adults and peers who could help protect them. This can leave them vulnerable to risk.

Additional Resources and Information

[NSPCC Learning: Looked after children](#) - Information on looked after children.

[Children's Commissioner](#) - Supporting the wellbeing and aspirations of children in care and supporting care leavers to achieve their full potential.

[Children's Commissioner: Teens in care and care leavers challenge perceptions and share successes on IMO](#) - Information on IMO (In My Opinion), which is a peer-led digital platform for teenagers in care and care leavers; created by teens with care experience with help from the Children's Commissioner for England.

[Become: The Charity for Children in Care and Young People](#) - Facts about the care system.

[Hampshire CAMHS Children in Care](#) - CAMHS information on children in care.

[Three myths about being in foster care](#) - Article highlighting common myths about being in foster care.

[What is Contextual Safeguarding?](#) - Information about contextual safeguarding.

References

Young, K (2019). [Coram-i - Missing looked after children](#). Accessed 22 November 2021.