

## Supporting looked after children in education

Dr Graham Connelly

Chartered Psychologist, Research Manager, Centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland (CELCIS)

### The context

A child becomes 'looked after' in Scotland when the state intervenes to address significant concerns about his or her safety or welfare. The intervention usually involves a children's hearing or a sheriff making an order for compulsory measures of supervision<sup>i</sup>. The supervision order stipulates the place of residence and also the conditions of the supervision. It is the duty of the local authority to make the arrangements to ensure that supervision requirements are carried out<sup>ii</sup>. The primary responsibility lies with social workers but in recent years the principle of multi-agency collaboration has been stressed in relation to supporting children and their families. In particular, the *Getting it right for every child* (GIRFEC) framework and the concept of 'corporate parenting', whereby all representatives of the local authority and its key partners (e.g. health agencies) are regarded as sharing the responsibilities of parents, have implications for professionals working with children. Teachers and other children's services' professionals have always had duties to co-operate in the children's hearings' system, for example in the provision of reports, but the newer arrangements imply a greater degree of responsibility to initiate action, to monitor arrangements and to call partner agencies to account. For example, all looked after children should have a care plan (now known as The Child's Plan) which should specify actions and responsibilities and arrangements for review. School staff should have contributed to the

plan, particularly in relation to educational aspects, and should be active in monitoring progress. School staff should also be prepared to voice concerns if, for example, a child's plan has not been shared with the school or if it does not include the child's educational needs and indicate responsibilities for ensuring these are addressed. In situations like this, a concerned teacher should discuss the matter with the head teacher or 'designated manager for looked after children'. A head should discuss concerns with a quality improvement officer, educational psychologist or directly with the relevant social worker or manager, depending on the circumstances and local arrangements. The GIRFEC principles place responsibilities on all professionals to act on their judgement and procedures for inter-agency communication should not present a barrier where there is a concern.

#### The Child's Plan

The format of the documentation varies between local authorities but all have common features, including:

- Summary of reasons for having a Child's Plan.
- Assessment, based on the My World Triangle (How I grow and develop. What I need from the people who look after me. My wider world). A teacher should be contributing to aspects concerning educational development.
- Summary of needs, including a clear Action Plan. A teacher should be contributing to this aspect too, aware that the schools provide opportunities for needing needs beyond the educational/intellectual domain.
- Explicit arrangements for reviewing the plan.

A supervision order can specify that the child should stay with a parent or other member of the family. It can also include requirements for the child to participate in a programme run by the local authority or a third sector organisation like the Prince's Trust or Includem. A social worker is assigned to the 'case' and will visit the family home or, for an older child, may arrange to meet at a social work office or other suitable location. Meetings are typically monthly, although the frequency of visits varies. Around 40% of the approximately 16,000

children looked after in Scotland are supervised 'at home'. An order can specify that the child should be looked after 'away from home', an arrangement sometimes referred to as being 'accommodated' or being 'taken into care'. The settings where children are looked after away from home include foster care, residential care and kinship care. Kinship care is a care category that can be confusing for teachers, since it is not uncommon for families to make private agreements for a child to live with a relative, temporarily or as a more permanent arrangement. Any formal kinship care placement should normally be specified in a supervision order.

The proportion of looked after children cared for in group settings in Scotland has been falling over a period of many years in comparison with increasing proportions of children living in foster and kinship placements. For example, in 1976, while 36% of looked after children lived in residential settings, 22% were in foster care. Today, the proportions are about 10% and 30% respectively. This figure is an average, however, and foster care is more common as a placement for younger children, while older children are more likely to be in residential care. About 20% of 12-15 year old looked after children live in residential settings, compared with less than three percent of 5-11 year olds and a negligible proportion of under-fives. Group settings include residential homes in the community (also called units, young people's centres or children's houses), residential schools and secure care (or safe care) settings<sup>iii</sup>.

Children who become looked after are very likely to have experienced neglect, trauma and disrupted living, often over a number of years. The way in which these experiences affect a child will be highly individual but they may include difficulties in forming appropriate relationships with adults and other children, behaviour which is difficult to manage and being

excessively withdrawn. Looked after children are at particular risk of having poor physical and mental health (often undiagnosed and not treated) and low educational attainment. They are less likely to have positive destinations beyond school. A high proportion of prisoners will have been looked after at some time, though this is not to say that most looked after children can expect to end up in prison. A high proportion leave school at the minimum age and this often coincides with the ending of supervision orders, a problem that has been recognised though perhaps not yet effectively addressed. Although local authorities have statutory obligations to carry out assessments of the needs of formerly looked after young people and to offer advice and support (including financial assistance), the help available is hampered by variability in access to services across Scotland and is also affected by the difficulties many young people face in adapting to independent living<sup>iv</sup>.

It is important to stress that the account you have just read is a generalisation. It is likely to be typical, but individual circumstances are very different. A child who becomes looked after as a result of events in their teens but who has had an otherwise happy childhood may experience no long-lasting distress, whereas another child who experienced inconsistent or violent parenting in early life may have persistent social and emotional difficulties. Also, while the cumulative effects of disadvantage typically result in poor health and low attainment, this is not always the case, or even inevitable. Some children have innate, or acquired, resilience which helps them to cope with difficulties and to do well educationally. Teachers are motivated when pupils respond positively in the classroom and can be understandably discouraged when children are regularly absent, forget or lose essential equipment, don't do homework or are disruptive or aggressive. It is important to remember that teachers can be highly influential and that being both encouraging and having high expectations are just as important as being understanding and sympathetic.

### The Ugly Duckling and the Beautiful Swan

'I was 12 years old: I was regarded by all the students as a 'weak' student; and school seemed cold and alienating. My teacher went on maternity leave, and the new teacher declared that she ignores past achievement and starts from a clean slate. She gave homework and I did my best to succeed... A day later I read my homework aloud...and the new teacher praised my work in front of everybody. I, the 'weak' student, the Ugly Duckling of my class, suddenly turned into a beautiful swan. She gave me confidence and opened a new clean page for me for success without ever looking back at my dark prior achievements.'

Yair, G. (2009). Cinderellas and ugly ducklings: Positive turning points in students' educational careers. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35 (3), 351-370.

### Looked after children in education

One simplistic but useful indicator of outcomes in education is attendance at school. The table below shows the percentage attendance of children who were looked after continuously in Scotland for 12 months during 2010-11. What is striking in this table is that children in foster care or preparing for adoption appear to attend well (better than the average for all children), while children in local authority children's homes have below average school attendance, and those remaining with their families while on home supervision orders have considerably below average attendance. These figures show the average for Scotland and the position may be different where you work.

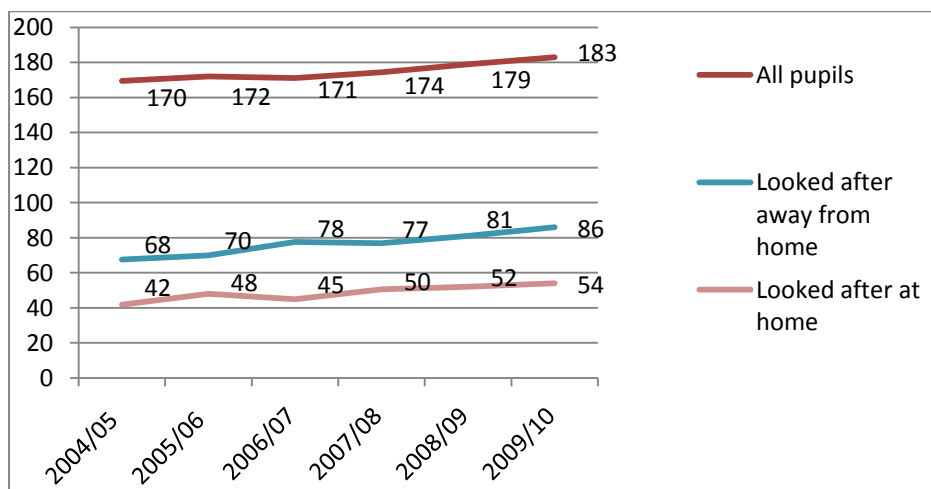
Table 1: Attendance of children continuously looked after for 12 months (June 2011)

Placement	Percentage attendance
Looked after at home	78.7
Residential care in local authority homes	84.0
Foster care by local authority	96.3
Foster care in independent or private sector placements	95.9
All children	93.2

Source: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/23123831/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/23123831/0)

The attendance of looked after children has improved in recent years, as has their attainment, though the gap in attainment between looked after children and all children has unfortunately not decreased, a fact which, rightly, is a matter of concern to politicians across the political spectrum. This ‘gap’ in attainment is shown graphically in Figure 1 which charts average tariff scores (a measure which allows comparison of different types of SQA qualifications) of S4 pupils for six successive academic years<sup>v</sup>. The gradient of each line is similar but the attainment of looked after children is, on average, significantly lower than for all pupils at the minimum school leaving age. Looked after children are also significantly more likely to be excluded from school, and difficulties in arranging suitable alternative provision can lead to pupils spending long periods in part-time schooling.

Figure 1: Average tariff score of S4 pupils, 2004/5 to 2009/10



Source: Kidner (2011). *SPICe briefing: The education of looked after children*. Edinburgh: The Scottish Parliament.

In the autumn of 2011, the Education and Culture Committee of the Scottish Parliament began an inquiry into the education of looked after children. The MSPs identified several themes emerging from the written submissions and oral evidence presented to the Committee, three of which are used as a structure for the commentary which forms the remainder of this chapter<sup>vi</sup>.

## **Readiness to learn**

Children who are emotionally stable and have secure attachments to caregivers are ready to learn, and their families ensure they attend school and encourage their curiosity. Looked after children (and also some other children with similarly unsettled backgrounds) may be unresponsive to encouragement or can be difficult to manage in the classroom. They may also have missed out on schooling and as a result have poorly developed skills in language and mathematics.

What can a teacher do? The answer to that question is unlikely to be straightforward and in any case the responsibility will not usually rest entirely with the teacher. On the other hand, teachers who are provided with information and given support can be extremely creative in developing effective approaches themselves to meet the child's needs. The following general suggestions can be adapted to suit individual circumstances.

1. You need to know that a child is looked after and have information about their placement. This might mean getting to know the foster carer or key worker in a residential unit, who can give valuable advice about how to build a relationship with the child and how to avoid triggering emotional outbursts.
2. Sharing sensitive information is more complex in a secondary school where a pupil is taught by several teachers. The child's right to privacy has to be balanced against the teacher's need to have information on which to base his or her approach with the child. Different teachers may hold different degrees of information: for example, it might be sufficient for a subject teacher to know a child is looked after and to receive advice about learning support, social and emotional needs. A pastoral care or

guidance teacher should know about the placement circumstances and the educational aspects of the child's plan. The way in which information is shared should be discussed with older children. While it is important to be sensitive to children's different views about the extent to which adults are given information, it is also wise to have a clear school policy and to stick to this. It is possible a social worker will be unwilling to share information about a child's circumstances with a school, citing confidentiality reasons. If this happens, the approach must be challenged; on the other hand, schools must be able to guarantee social workers that sensitive information will be treated respectfully.

3. A child with attachment difficulties learns that adults behave inconsistently. It is important that you don't lower your expectations for appropriate behaviour in the classroom and attitudes to learning in school and at home, while also being understanding and supportive when difficulties arise. The child may expect you to give up, to be relieved when they are absent, and to be tempted not to follow this up diligently.
4. A high proportion of looked after children report being bullied at school, often apparently because they appear different to other children. Looked after children may exhibit bullying behaviour towards other children and the school may receive complaints from parents. The school's anti-bullying policy and strategies will be helpful in tackling problems as soon as they arise.



Mary had been attending the school for three months. It was her third high school and better than the others. She had to move schools when her last foster placement broke down. She was getting on well with Anne, her new foster carer, and she liked the new town, even though it meant she couldn't see her friends often. Sometimes things got too much and she felt panicky, afraid she'd blow up. Anne was being really supportive but it was terrible when the emotions came over her at school. The head of year had been really nice. Anne had given her a scarf with her perfume sprayed on and told her to take deep breaths and smell the scarf when the feelings came on. It really worked. One day, in maths, Mr Anderson told her to take the scarf off; it wasn't school uniform. Mary protested and things became heated. She got referred to the principal teacher for swearing. At home that night, Anne noticed Mary was not her usual bubbly self and asked what was wrong. The story of the incident at school came out. Anne suggested she would make an appointment to see the head of year and explain things. Mrs Smith was very understanding and said she would have a word with Mr Anderson. Things were a lot better after that and Mr Anderson even offered to give Mary extra help at lunchtime when he discovered she needed Standard Grade maths to get a place at college.

## **Support at school**

Each school has an obligation to appoint a senior member of staff who accepts the role of Designated Manager (DM). The DM will usually be a head or depute in an early years' establishment or primary school; in a secondary school the role may be performed by a member of the pastoral care or additional support for learning teams. In reality, the DM is likely to be a manager with several demanding responsibilities and competing calls on their time. While in a small school the individual holding the role may have considerable direct involvement with looked after children and their parents and carers, in larger schools the role may involve ensuring policies and procedures are in place and ensuring that support arrangements are co-ordinated. Detailed guidance about the role is provided in a Scottish Government paper called *Core Tasks for Designated Managers*<sup>vii</sup>. The core tasks are listed under four headings: communication; meeting the needs of looked after children and young people; advocacy; learning and development.

Two sample tasks taken from the 'communication' category

- The designated manager must know which pupils in their establishment are looked after and, in the same way as for all other pupils, maintain confidential files in relation to each of them; sharing relevant information on a need to know basis.
- The designated manager must consider who else in the establishment needs to know some details of a child or young person's background, how much of this should be disclosed and consider how best to take into account the wishes of the child or young person; including any desire for confidentiality which can be reasonably and legally accommodated.

The lists of tasks are rather long and may appear daunting. In making sense of the role, it might be helpful for a DM to consider that the fundamental responsibilities are to ensure that the school plays its part in relation to the action plan within the child's plan and to collaborate effectively with the other agencies involved.

There are two characteristics which typify looked after children: problems in attendance at school and gaps in education which lead to low attainment. In essence the task of improving the educational outcomes of looked after children boil down to addressing poor attendance and gaps in fundamental skills and knowledge.

There is research evidence which indicates that where looked after children are given additional support explicitly intended to improve their attainment the effects can be quite dramatic. For example, researchers at the University of Strathclyde collected 5-14 National Assessment data in reading, writing and mathematics over two successive years for 230 looked after children who had participated in projects aimed at improving attainment or their attitude to education. About 40% of the children advanced by one 5-14 level, better than the average progress of looked after children and about the same as the progress achieved by all children<sup>viii</sup>. In a study by researchers at the University of Ottawa, foster carers received a six hour briefing in tutoring primary-aged children in reading and maths. The carers provided

three hours per week of home tutoring for 30 weeks, using a specific programme. The children made significantly greater gains in reading and maths scores, compared with children in a comparison group that had not yet received the extra help<sup>ix</sup>.

An important message which comes from the testimony of formerly looked after children is that we should never give up on children, even though they might be very difficult to help. Many researchers have pointed out that having high aspirations for looked after children, and demonstrating this in different ways, is vital. Teachers can be hugely influential but as they engage with children for a relatively short part of their lives, they don't always get to hear about the positive effects of their influence. Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, concerned with the education of children in deprived circumstances rather than specifically about looked after children, made several recommendations, of which two, related to progression to post-school education, are presented here. What opportunities do you have to make a contribution in relation to these objectives?

- Raise parents' and children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education from primary school.
- Help parents and children to believe that their own actions can lead to advanced education.

### **Joint working**

The GIRFEC approach encourages professionals to view the child as part of a wider system comprising family and community, to be vigilant towards the child's broader developmental

needs and to avoid a child at risk of neglect or abuse disappearing from the professional ‘radar’. The GIRFEC system aims to do this by appointing a ‘named person’, usually a health visitor for pre-school children and the head teacher or other senior manager in a school setting. The role of the named person includes ensuring that ‘core’ information, such as where the child lives and the details of the principal carers is accurate and acting as a conduit or advocate to access additional support for the family.

The Education and Culture Committee heard evidence that ‘joined up working’ was not always happening and that this represented a barrier to improving the outcomes of looked after children. Effective multi-agency working involves local authorities and their partners acting as ‘good corporate parents’, a term which is often described as professionals behaving as they would if they were acting for their own children or the children of relatives or close friends. The expectations of corporate parents in different agencies, including education authorities, are specified in the Scottish Government publication, *These are our Bairns*<sup>x</sup>. Among the factors which are important in determining the effectiveness of corporate parenting are: good communication; clarity of roles; and procedures for information sharing. Research suggests that two changes are demanded of professionals in doing interagency work. These are described in the box below.

First, practitioners learnt that they needed to look beyond the boundaries of their organisations at what else was going on in children’s lives and, at the very least, to develop some understanding of how other professionals interpreted specific children, their needs and strengths. Second, this outward-looking stance was accompanied by a revived focus on individual children with complex lives who were interconnected with their families and communities. The complexity of children’s worlds was no longer hidden from practitioners by their looking at them using the narrow lenses of a tightly focused profession

Edwards, A., Daniels, H., Gallagher, T., Leadbetter, J. & Warmington, P. (2009). *Improving inter-professional collaborations: Multi-agency working for children’s wellbeing*. London: Routledge (pp 9-10).

## Conclusion

The education of looked after children first became a concern for policy makers and education and social work inspectors in Scotland around 2001 with the publication of a report called *Learning with Care*<sup>xi</sup>. The extent of the action required to remove barriers and make progress was outlined in considerable detail in a further report, *We Can and Must do Better*, in 2007<sup>xii</sup>. The timescale since these reports is relatively short for seeing significant improvements in a social problem which has resisted change. And yet the politicians are understandably impatient for significant improvement. Individual teachers or managers cannot be held responsible for social change on a grand scale but it is important that you don't underestimate the contribution you can make at a more local and individualised level.

I hope that this chapter is useful in providing a framework for your thinking about the task and also in highlighting further sources to support your work. There is more support available in the form of the *We Can and Must do Better Training Materials DVD-ROM*, a compendium of resources, presented to be used in both individual and group learning. This should be widely available in local authorities from specialist looked after children teams, quality improvement officers and training units. If you need further advice or support, please contact CELCIS, The centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland ([www.celcis.org](http://www.celcis.org)).

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> More information about the Children's Hearing system is available at this website, including links to information packs aimed at primary schools and secondary schools, [www.chscotland.gov.uk/](http://www.chscotland.gov.uk/). Follow the links at the 'Publications' tab.

<sup>ii</sup> The reference to local authority refers to the council covering the area where the child is living. Sometimes, however, a foster placement will be with carers who live in another local authority area. The primary

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responsibility remains with the family's local authority but of course the co-operation of the carer's local authority is vital. This is an extra complication that can be a barrier to accessing services if communication is not effective.

<sup>iii</sup> Teachers who are preparing cpd sessions for colleagues and would like to use the most recent statistics can find these on the Scottish Government children and young people statistics website here:  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Children)

<sup>iv</sup> For more information about childhood trauma and neglect and advice for teachers an excellent resource is Dr Bruce Perry's Childhood Trauma Academy: [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org).

<sup>v</sup> See here for a more detailed explanation.

<sup>vi</sup> A full account of the Inquiry is available on the Scottish Parliament website at [www.scottish.parliament.uk](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk). Navigate to Committees and then to Inquiry into the Education of Looked After Children.

<sup>vii</sup> Download Core Tasks at this location: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/09/09143710/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/09/09143710/0).

<sup>viii</sup> The full research report is available here: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/09/12095701/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/09/12095701/0).

<sup>ix</sup> The full research report is available here:  
[www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/crecs/eng/documents/ef\\_tu\\_foster\\_parents.pdf](http://www.socialsciences.uottawa.ca/crecs/eng/documents/ef_tu_foster_parents.pdf).

<sup>x</sup> See: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/08/29115839/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/08/29115839/0).

<sup>xi</sup> See: [www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/lwc.html](http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/lwc.html).

<sup>xii</sup> See: [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/01/15084446/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/01/15084446/0).