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Book review

The Children of Looked After Children: Outcomes, Experiences and Ensuring Meaningful Support to Young Parents In and Leaving Care

by Louise Roberts

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Published in March 2021, *The Children of Looked After Children* draws together findings from a four and a half year research study looking at parents in and leaving care in Wales. Funded by Health and Care Research Wales, the research was undertaken by Dr Louise Roberts within the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University.

In drawing together the study findings, Roberts seeks to bring attention to parents in and leaving care; provide a space for their voices; and to use the findings from the research as a tool to support practitioners and services when thinking about policy and practice relating to parents in and leaving care. In *The Children of Looked After Children* Roberts provides a discussion and critique of the role of the state as a parent, its interactions with parents in and leaving care, and asks the reader to engage in their own questioning of the states parenting competency.

The Children of Looked After Children is structured around three core thematic areas: outcomes, experiences and supports. Drawing on both primary data collected through the 'Voices study' and secondary analysis of data collected through the School Health Research Network health and wellbeing survey (Long et al., 2017) and the Welsh Adoption study (Anthony et al., 2016) a comprehensive picture of the issues relating to parents in and leaving care is presented. Within the narratives of the parents and professionals included there are stories of resilience, transformation, 'success', and the joys of parenting presented. However, the prevailing themes included the increased likelihood of pregnancy and parenthood for care experienced young people, experiences of 'disadvantage and adversity', limited and inconsistent supports for parents, and a heightened risk of their child(ren) being separated from them (Roberts, 2021, p. 124). Discussing these findings Roberts revisits the question of the role of the state as a parent, the relationship of this to the concept of parenting 'success' and the relationship between parents in and leaving care and the state as parent.

In the final pages of the book a letter to the reader from Jen, a care experienced parent and member of the 'Voices' study research advisory group, is shared. In her letter Jen shares her own experiences of being a parent in and leaving care,

reflecting on the decisions taken about her and her child, and the immediate and enduring impact of these decisions:

I can't and don't regret having my children. I just wish things had been different. I wish that I had met people earlier who made me realise I'm not a bad person. I wish I had known my legal rights a bit more. All of the things that I had later in life, the chance, the support, the relationship, the family, I wish I had that earlier (Roberts, 2021, p. 142).

Jen finishes her letter to us by calling to action 'anyone and everyone who can make a difference' (Roberts, 2021: p.142). Roberts too brings the book to a close by emphasising the urgent need for attention at both local and national levels to begin addressing the poor outcomes, disadvantages and challenges evidenced within her findings.

Overall, *The Children of Looked After Children* brings renewed focus to parents in and leaving care, expanding the existing body of knowledge by advancing our understanding of the outcomes, experiences and supports related to parents in and leaving care. Additionally, through the concept of 'success' Roberts challenges the reader to consider the interconnection between the 'success' of the states parenting with that of the parent in and leaving care. In doing so Roberts argues that parenting 'success' for young people in and leaving care is indicative of the state's own parenting 'success', moving the discussion away from individual parenting behaviour and instead questioning the accountability of the state as a parent.

Since the publication of *The Children of Looked After Children*, Roberts and colleagues have begun implementing the recommendations for policy and practice through the co-production of [The Charter](#) for best practice when supporting parents in and leaving care. Aimed at Corporate Parents The Charter seeks to get their commitment to best practice when working with parents in and leaving care. Whilst sign-up to the charter in itself will not lead to the scale of policy and practice change evidenced as needed within Roberts's findings, this research alongside The Charter is raising the profile of parents in and leaving care within the consciousness of the sector; a key step in building the readiness needed for change. In addition, Roberts provides evidenced recommendations for immediate development of national and local data, increased policy

recognition and development and practice guidance for supporting young people in and leaving care with their sexual health and as parents. As such *The Children of Looked After Children* offers an accessible, yet comprehensive overview of current issues relating to parents in and leaving care and would be of interest and value to health and social care practitioners, researchers and policy makers interested in support for care experienced people into adulthood, early family support and child protection. Having said this, I would recommend to everyone that if you read nothing else, do skip to p.139 and read Jen's letter.

This review is of the e-version of this book, acquired via open access download.

References

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About the author

Emma Young is a Research and Evaluation Associate at CELCIS. She supports CELCIS to embed, use and develop evidence across our work. In addition to her role at CELCIS Emma is also undertaking a part-time PhD in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at the University of Strathclyde focussed on exploring professional responses to mothers in and leaving care in pregnancy and in parenthood.