

Experts Through Experience: Enquiry 1

**Brothers and Sisters:
Reasons for separating, critiques,
positives and improvements**

Who Are We?

We are a group of care-experienced young people who are passionate about understanding how Durham's social care system for children operates.

As a group we underwent professional training (involving teamwork, communication and sensitivity training) to better prepare us for what we were going to do.

April 2023

We decided that as a first investigation we would look into why brothers and sisters are separated

October 2023

We interviewed and were approved by senior managers in County Durham who gave us the "thumbs up" to continue our investigation.

November 2023 to February 2024

We spent three months planning our interviews.

March 2024

Our interview session took place with young people, foster carers and professionals

June 2024

We showed our presentation to

Our Methodology

1 Planned what would be best to obtain the information we wanted

We discussed what would be the best way to obtain the information we wanted and agreed on interviewing young people and professionals.

2 Planned our questions and interview event

We created our questions that we were going to ask young people and professionals, while remaining sensitive.

3 Carried out our interviews at the YP's hub

We carried out our interviews on young people and professionals and made notes.

4 Gathered our information

This is where we collated our findings and sought out extra statistics from senior managers to support our case.

72% of children were in contact with at least 1 sibling and said their relationship with their sibling was in a better place now. There was an example of foster carers facilitating 'contact' which worked extremely well.



The Mocking Bird pilot got glowing reviews. Professionals/carers asked how do we find out more about it?

What is working well

60% of children said there was nothing they would like to change about coming into care.

Positively almost all children did not think their entry into care was a bad thing. They were able to understand this over time.
"Time is a healer."

What we are worried about

Our research suggests most children and young people do not fully understand why they came into care or felt they did not have the opportunity to share their views.

RESOURCES- Professionals told us the main reason for sibling separations was lack of resources, not just locally but nationally, especially for larger sibling groups.

If children needed to be separated, could they be placed closer together? What things could we do better with the resources we have?

Only 50% of children/young people were happy with the amount of family time they had.

Children weren't aware they could ask for more family time.

Professionals said the effects of COVID still have had an adverse affect on resources.

It was raised that there needed to be more pre-emptive support to prevent sibling breakdowns, like that of Full Circle.

We were disheartened to hear that consistency of social workers remains an issue.

Some children were very mature in their approach to reconnection and didn't want to get involved with separated siblings to avoid them becoming distressed if they were settled.

Recommendations/Next Steps

- Extension of the Mockingbird approach
- The importance of life story work and words and pictures to help a child and young person retrospectively understand what happened when entering into care, to help with understanding and to rebuild relationships at a later stage. Ensure there's access to life story work and to audit the quality of the work that's undertaken.
- Later life letters – link in life story work.
- Hearing and responding to the voice of the child is critical and the foundation towards a successful outcome. Respect needs to be given to the wishes and needs of all within the sibling group so that it is the right thing for all.

Recommendations

- Children and young people placed real value in the relationships they have with their carers and felt that carers having the confidence and permission to speak openly about their past and their sibling relationships should be further encouraged.
- The importance felt by children for the social worker and the care team to give time and fully explore issues both now and retrospectively so that the child can understand, and relationships are given the opportunity to be reunified over time.
- The views of children in respect of family time arrangements need to be heard. A recommendation would be that greater preparation time is given with agreements in place so that children get the most from family time. Additionally children felt that the facilities in family time settings require upgrading so that they feel invested in – for example rooms designed by the children or an opportunity to bring along cherished items such as family pets. The Experts group suggest a process is developed to review children's views around family time on a regular basis including how much is offered and give children the choice as to who they would like to see.

Reflections by our Experts

- “If I asked a question I gave them the space to answer...after all, that’s what I’ve been through myself.”
- The interactions that took place were relaxed, supportive and open conversations were emotionally warm, empathetic and mutually supportive.
- Professional observers saw a sincerity and a real value in care experienced children and young people interviewing one another.
- And our learning.....
 - “It has been difficult to analyse the data, what does it all mean?”
 - “It has been a stressful process as it relates to personal experience”
 - Observations from those involved indicate the value of a peer mentoring approach. The experts group would like to see more ways in which this approach can be approached, for example through the Children in Care Council.