

This submission is based on the transcript of an interview of Tiegan, a 19-year-old woman living in the UK (North Yorkshire) who has experienced alternative care. The interview, carried out by ATD Fourth World, took place over Zoom on 8 May 2021. As a baby, Tiegan spent a few months in a mother-and-baby unit with her mother, who was incarcerated at that time. Tiegan then lived with her father and grandparents, before moving to foster care for two years. At age 4, she was adopted. Her sisters are both in care, with her 12-year-old sister in a residential care home.

How should adults care for children?

- **Standards for material well-being are too high**

“We have too high standards in most Western and developed countries of what a well-cared for child is. When my sister got taken into care, one of the issues they had against my mum was that she was sleeping on the sofa. My two sisters need space because they've both got special needs. And they said 'Well that's not a proper bed', but who's defining a sofa as not a proper bed? There's too much pressure on parents to buy all this fancy schmancy stuff. If they can't afford it, but they can afford a big bean bag that their kid sleeps on, does it really matter?”

- **Provide a safe space to express themselves freely**

“Children need independence and freedom to go out and explore the world, but they need somewhere they know they can go back to that's safe and welcoming where they can restore their mental health if they need to. They should be allowed to talk. A well-cared for child will have people listening to them all the time. Their opinions from a young age will be valued as much as anyone else's. Even if they say stupid things, they should still hear 'That wasn't the wisest thing, and we can't take you up on that idea, but this is why'. They need things explained. If you keep saying 'don't do that', the child will grow up thinking 'well why *can't* I do that?', and probably do more damage later in life.”

The impact of Covid-19

- **Rigid and isolating protocols**

“My sister had a COVID scare. She tested negative but was in a 10-day quarantine, literally locked into her bedroom for 10 days. Staff weren't allowed to see her, they talked through her door with a mask on. She's 12 years old, and she's got autism. She's

tactile, she needs hugs. She got none of that and was on the edge by the end of quarantine. Care homes are known for protocols, being bureaucratic. Children there haven't had the support and friendliness we need in this scary time when some kids are really anxious about COVID."

"Contact visits with family are now a lot harder, because it's not well managed. A lot of kids in care don't know when that contact will happen, if it'll be allowed, or how will it happen. Will they have to social distance from their parents? What other family members are they seeing? It's so tough because you're already taken away from your parents. That contact session might be the one time you get to see them every month, but you're not able to hug your own parents, even if they're right there. Kids in care already have enough to deal with, and the pandemic too, and they don't really have any family members to talk to about it."

Care homes are "not like family homes. They're run with policies, bureaucracy, and rules. They're non-flexible. It's like 'Here's your rule book', but they don't work. These are children, not adults, so don't make it seem like a prison. You can't put a load of policies and rules on children, it just doesn't work out."

"If policymakers actually went into care homes, they would be very surprised."

How to avoid alternative care?

- **Early preventative support**

"Parents and families need support when the child is youngest. Between ages 0 and 4, there's little to no support. That is a big issue."

Professionals should regularly offer help and ask parents: "How're you holding up? Do you need any support?" They should almost go through a questionnaire: 'Are you okay with your mental health? Any issues you're wanting to bring to a doctor but you haven't had time? Anything else going on? Are you struggling with anything? These are services you can access,' When kids need to go for [doctor] appointments is a good time to grab the parent and go, 'How're you doing?'. Ten minutes to just get it out and talk would make it convenient for parents."

- **Consider parents' needs**

There needs to be "more mental health support, and more understanding of parents' trauma and backgrounds. It needs to all change."

As an infant, Tiegán fell very ill with meningitis. “There wasn't any support for my father, or anyone reaching out to him saying, ‘I know this must be difficult, what you've just been through was hellish. Here's our support and understanding’. In his panic, my dad thought he had nearly killed me. How did they expect him just to pick up and go ‘I can do this’? Even though he was looking after me well doesn't mean that he wasn't having an internal battle.”

- **Tailor guidance to parents' needs**

“I've met many different social workers who have a negative view of fathers. That needs to change.”

“Sometimes parents have struggles like potty training. They're like, ‘What am I doing wrong?’ There are books; but why is that limited to books? Some parents will be illiterate. We need more workshops for parents because with the way the world keeps changing, the way you were brought up is very different to how you're meant to bring up your child.”

“When it's found that kids are now living with a single parent, or their parents have mental health issues, there should be extra support and monitoring almost, check-ups of that parenting, because they're the more vulnerable kind. For parents who may be more vulnerable, it's better to be ready to help quickly, rather than letting it get to crisis point, when it's too late for real help.”

- **Appreciate parents' efforts**

“Professionals stress weaknesses, weaknesses, weaknesses! Even things I would count as strengths, [social workers] saw as weaknesses for some reason. But if there are concerns about a child, they should bring in the parents and say, ‘We see you're doing this really well, it's cute how every day the child runs up to you and gives you the biggest hug, but there's some concerns about what you're feeding them’.”

“Parents need to step away from their roles and responsibilities for a few hours to just purely have some good old fun with their child.”

What support could be given to children who might face greater challenges to stay with their families?

People in need should be prioritised. Tiegán's mother and two sisters with disabilities needed a larger home. While they spent more than two years on a waiting list for a three-bedroom house, both sisters were placed in care for two years. Tiegán also points to the lack of available council housing, which required her father to accept housing far

from any support network.

"If there are concerns about children—for example, my sister with behaviour issues—they need to actually diagnose them because sometimes that unlocks the door of services. Diagnosis is the rare gem that hardly anyone gets. I only got it because we basically fought our way through the system, with all the power we could."

- **Be understanding of parents' efforts**

"There's so much pressure: 'A parent should be able to look after their child 24/7, until they're 18 at least'. But no parent can do that, let alone a parent with a disabled child, because they are human, and they only have a certain amount of energy and motivation."

What support should be given to children with greater challenges so that they can enjoy equal rights in alternative care?

- **Respect and embrace different backgrounds and cultures**

"Sometimes with people's ethnicities and migrants, we think, 'They'll just want to keep their own culture'. But actually they might be very willing to accept and be part of our culture as well. Don't start forcing them: 'You're from Pakistan, here's all the Pakistan stuff', because sometimes they're a bit like 'Thanks, but I came to England'."

"You need open spaces for refugees or migrants to talk and work through what they've experienced. If there's a particular dress style, allow that to happen. There should be books and videos to watch about different cultures."

"It matters to meet people from various ethnicities and cultures and spend time with them. Activities like dances might be really important to them to be part of. [...] Crafts are key, or even visual representations about culture and ethnicity, like a hallway having a map of how we're all from different places, but living under the same roof."

- **Staff training about disabilities**

"If they know they're going to have a blind child for example in care, they should give the staff workshops, seminars, training, saying 'this is part of a package we will put on for all staff on how to deal with this blind child', rather than just going in there themselves blind, and going 'Well, this will work out' which it won't."

"Care homes are too regimented. They should adapt house rules when they get certain kids in and make individualised plans for each child."

"In a home, everyone's an individual with different needs, different ways of functioning. That'd be a good development lesson: everyone learns different, everyone lives different."

- **Support those with more challenges**

"Kids need space to say what they're thinking. In care homes, it can just be social workers or care staff with them, and kids can feel a bit scared to talk to them, thinking 'You're just looking at your tick box here.'"

"Staff should regularly say 'Are the things we put in place for you helping? And if not, what do you need that will help you be the best person you can be?'"

"Sometimes that's all kids need, especially after a stressful day, they might need a hug."

"The staff should go on a rota of two hours where they are just sat in a living room or bumbling around the care home, accessible to the kids."

"That's the issue with care homes sometimes: they don't feel informal, but that is your home."

- **More freedom for children**

"It's hard enough trying to get siblings to get on with each other. Why do we put six kids with different backgrounds, different traumas, and just go 'Right, you're now siblings basically, and you're going to get on, no arguments, and if you have an argument we're going to ground you.'"

"Not all children can be friends with one another. Sometimes you've just got to let kids be kids, and adults need to respect that."

What can adults do to make sure children and young people are safe from harm in alternative care?

- **Facilitating relationships between children**

"They should not force people together. It's a lot more damaging if you try to force kids together because if they get into arguments, either they will run away, this is the extreme, or they might hurt each other."

"They should tell children in alternative care 'We're just going to give you your own space. Not everything should come with a punishment. It's better to have discussion, and open space to talk and work through things.'"

- **Increasing the number of visits allowed**

“My sister was only meant to have one face-to-face a month but she wanted another one. She was getting so distraught and the care home kept going ‘No you can't, it's not within the protocol', or 'the courts haven't allowed that'. Give them the same freedom they would have got if they were with family or parents. The point of care is children having a better life, [not] being restricted from doing day-to-day things they would have done if they were at home.”

Advice for adults providing help in alternative care

- **Understand that alternative care is difficult for children**

“It's losing your parent basically. Even if they're there, you've lost them in some ways, and you've lost your family. You might not be able to see certain family members for months, if not years.”

“You still have to be disciplined with kids in care, and you still have to treat them not too differently, but also with respect.”

“Show that you care about them, you've thought about them, you're ready to discuss with them.”

How can adults help children to know or find out about where they came from, their culture, language or other parts of their identity?

- **Allow children to educate themselves about their own background**

“Give them access to as much as possible that's connected to their background or their culture.”

What kind of support do children and young people need when they are changing care placement?

- **Discussion and preparation**

“Let them see the new placement before they actually move, meet the main staff, and just have some time to see it, rather than just walking in. Let them talk to the new placement staff beforehand.”

“Organise fun activities ... just going to the park, or a movie evening, or even a picnic in the back garden, something so they can get to know each other.”

What kind of support do young people need when they're leaving alternative care?

“The harsh reality is that kids leaving care are thrown out and are meant to just be adults on their own at age 16.”

- **Provide help if requested after they leave care**

“They might need respite care for two or three days, so they can go somewhere and get a couple of meals cooked for them.”

“They need contacts for different services, like mental health support, special needs support, lots of other support.”

“Before they're left alone, staff should know that they have at least some basics like a chair or table or bed, cutlery, and that they feel comfortable.”

“They should get peer support from the care home.”

“The best way for them to feel supported, is that they don't just feel like the 'care kid' who social services had enough of, and now have thrown out.”

This interview was carried out with support from the Coalition to End Child Poverty.