

### **Our take on alternative care: family, relationships, support**

We — Paige, Bennett and Tianna\* — are care experienced young people aged 19-20 living in supported accommodation in the West Midlands (UK) with our support worker Camryn. Francesca, a care-experienced adult, interviewed us about our experience of alternative care for ATD Fourth World. These are some of the things we want to say about: **family and relationships; and about support.**

- ***Family and relationships***

When you grow up in alternative care it takes a long time to make sense of family relationships.

“I did end up developing a hatred towards my mum, because I didn't understand like why she didn't want me and stuff like that, you know. It was just hard and because I couldn't see her as well, all my questions that I had couldn't really be answered.” (Paige)

Our relationships with our siblings are really important and really complicated.

“My older sister, as soon as she turned 16, she got in touch with them. She's all pilly pally with my biological family, acting as if like, it's fine.” (Tianna)

“It wasn't like I had bad carers, but it was just like, about the word identity, it was hard to kind of find who I was because I'd spent so long under my sister's wing. And that was the only thing I kind of had to my biological family.” (Paige)

This can be really difficult when social workers are inconsistent with us and our siblings.

“They banned me from seeing my mum; but when my little brother and my sister went into care, they were allowed to see her. So it was like if she's such a bad person, why can they go and see her and I can't? It just didn't really make sense.” (Paige)

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\* These are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the young people.

We know family is important – at school everyone else talks about it! We deserve to know about our family, too.

“All the people I've gone to school with and stuff they have a family and they know their background. They can go to their nan's house, they know cousins.” (Paige)

Deciding what to do when we're old enough to trace our biological family is difficult – and they have expectations toward us that don't feel realistic.

“Now I've become a care leaver, I'm supposed to go and find my family on my own: I'm supposed to go and act like nothing ever happened, I'm supposed to just go to all these family meet-ups and just pretend that I know everyone. Everyone knows me and it's like, I don't know these people.” (Paige)

“My biological dad was trying to convince me to move to where his family lives and it's like: 'I don't know you, you've only just started talking to me'. They've only just told me my biological name. He just told me that I've got five different siblings and God knows how many cousins, and it's like, why the hell would I uproot from where I am now to somewhere where I don't know anyone. I mean I got adopted for pretty good reasons, I wouldn't change myself for a family that didn't make changes to keep me.” (Tianna)

Alternative carers just aren't the same as having a family of your own.

“I'm kind of tired of being in a situation or finding myself with people, and then all of a sudden, when things change, it's like everything just gets pulled away. Because it's kind of like I still have my foster carers, but it's different, because now I know they're not my parents; but they're going to have to look after other kids. It's different now.” (Paige)

“I started calling my mum not my mum, I'd say 'you're not my mum don't tell me what to do', which obviously hurt my mum because me and my mum used to have a really good, strong relationship. Then as soon as we got told that we were adopted, like the click of your fingers, that relationship just broke down between me and my mum. Anytime she told me what to do, I'd be like, 'you're not my mum, you can't tell me what to do'.” (Tianna)

## **Support**

We know our families had problems – but we'd have liked to see them get more support before we were taken away from them.

“My mum was a young mum, so I feel like maybe, if someone tried to support her, instead of just taking her kids off her, it could have been different.” (Paige)

“I would have changed that process, and brought in additional services to have given a timescale for things to have changed, and been given that opportunity. And I would also have introduced family into it, because that was never an option within my circumstances or some circumstances; it was just not even said, let alone done.”  
(Francesca)

Social workers aren't able to give us the support we need – they are too focused on the process.

“Sometimes it is hard talking to a social worker. With my 18-plus worker, I know that when she comes we're going to talk about this, this, this and this, and that's basically the main reason why she's coming out.” (Paige)

The meetings and procedures we have to go through are not helpful – we don't want them.

“Every eight months we're supposed to go to an interview. We'd have to go to a room with a massive table, there was like four people, and me, the child. That does not hold the child's attention. If you did something wrong throughout the year, it was more like we were put on call.” (Bennett)

“I feel like it's a bit ridiculous because you've got someone who sees me every year sitting there, and you've got my carer, you've got my social worker, you've got their link worker, and I'm just supposed to sit there and tell everyone how I feel.” (Paige)

They're organised in a way that makes us stand out and gets us bullied.

“We had to get an independent evaluation plan too – who the hell has those? Just because you're adopted does not mean you get treated differently, but you know, that's when you get bullied, because people notice the difference.” (Tianna)

“Teachers will come in and be like, 'oh, can I just pull her out of class'. Everyone asked me, and you know exactly that all you're going to do is go and sit in a room and talk about your educational needs, and then have to go back into class, and explain to everyone where you were, or make up a lie of where you were. It's just like, why?”  
(Paige)

The way they hold meetings is like we're criminals.

"It was like going to court every year, having everyone stare at you like 'we heard that this had occurred, do you want to explain further?' And you've got 4 or 5 people's eyes staring at you like 'um, this got sorted and dealt with'." (Paige)

"When I ran away from school, I got put into a meeting with like five different teachers.

They watched me literally walk out the front door, because I was getting told off for something that a teacher caused. The teacher grabbed me by the blazer and I told them to get their fucking hands off of me, because teachers aren't supposed to touch you.

So the teacher went and told the head teacher that I'd sworn at them, so I was getting put in isolation for something that she had caused, because she never told them that she grabbed me by the blazer." (Tianna)

The language social workers use about us is not OK for us.

Camryn: I can vouch for that as well, because last year or the year before, we used to always have to fill out a review on you all, and it would just be something social services would send over, but it would be like, 'how does the child play with others?'

Tianna: I sincerely hope that if you did that with me you did not say that I happily sit around the table playing dominoes with people who I don't even have a clue about.

Camryn: It would just be stupid things like that, like 'does the child do things independently?'

**Bennett: The 'child' is 17 or 18!**

Procedures to 'listen to us' are tokenistic and insulting.

"You were in the hot seat and everyone's staring at you, and everyone's going to read out everything about you. And it's the same thing all the time, it's not like now you're older, let's talk about something different. It's the same things I told you when I was 11 years old, when I was 15, it's the exact same, you asked me the same questions, it's not really going to change. It's the same generic questions that you asked everyone.

Like, what do you expect from me?" (Paige)

"They'd say 'what do you want to do with your life?' I'd be like well, I want to be a professional basket-baller, when my choices in school would have been like health and social care and something else, no but no, 'okay, professional basket-baller'. Does it even matter what I say at this point, like I could say anything to you, and you're just going to smile and say, 'okay, that's great'." (Paige)

We aren't told about the support we can get until it's too late.

"I basically got involved in the Birmingham Children's Care Council, but that was when I was about 16 or 17. So, that is run by the Advocate Service. Now, I didn't even know there was an Advocate Service. I didn't even know people could have advocates, and I mean, it was nice, knowing that advocates were there, but I think personally for me, it was a bit too late at that point." (Paige)

Children in alternative care need real support – not box ticking.

"What they should have done is the second someone moved into care, instead of coming out and asking questions that they will know over the phone, they take that child out for the day, so they can bond, instead of just sitting in the living room going 'yeah, yeah, that's all good'." (Bennett)

"I would just tell them whatever would make them happy, so I could leave." (Paige)

Our support needs don't end when we turn 18 – but it can feel like the support we receive does.

"Four weeks is all I got to find a job, make sure I've got everything. I walked in at one point and my carer just went, 'you're leaving in four weeks'. Like, alright. I haven't even received the text from her to say, 'are you okay? Do you need anything?' It's been 'bye', no more contact. No more nothing. You want something from her? No. That's why I'm afraid to text her, I don't like her any more." (Bennett)

"There's just so much stress. Because it was weird for me, because my foster family was completely different from my biological family, so it was like being pulled in two different directions where 'we want you to be like this', 'well, we want you to be like this'. And I'm in the middle. Sometimes I would just run away. I'd just go to random places, and I even still do it now, and it's just because it's what I'm used to, when things get too much and I get too overwhelmed, I'll just run away, whether that's physically, mentally, I'm just away." (Paige)

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