

Our rights, our say

Submission prepared by ATD Fourth World based on consultations run by Kaydence & Aurelia Drayak from Teen Advocacy with 22 care-experienced children, 15 of them in Scotland and the other 7 in Canada. Twenty of these children were between the ages of 13 and 18. The other two were aged 9-12.

All of these children have been in foster care. Most experienced several placements and a couple have had many different placements. Nobody had just one.

Four of the teens were removed from their parents at birth. Most were removed between the ages of 4 and 10 years old. Most have been removed long term. Six have been placed in kinship care. Nobody was removed for less than six months. Some have been in children's homes and some have also been homeless. Two teens have been placed in secure mental health units. None of these units are children's units. Being placed in adult mental health facilities was very upsetting. Two teens have also been placed in youth correction facilities.

A few of the teens were in kinship care after foster care. Some went home after being homeless for a while. Some had no contact with their families during their living apart from their family, while others had contact. One is searching for his birth family after his adopted mum and dad sent him back to foster care.

1. Our take on our rights

Do we have rights?

"We know that the UNCRC says we have rights. But it doesn't always feel like we do."

"If we have rights, adults should take us seriously, even when there are difficult decisions."

"If rights were a priority, we'd be told about them and they wouldn't be sidelined."

Rights and wrongs – our rights should not harm us

"Sometimes our rights are respected – but sometimes they are misused in ways which harm us."

"Not everyone knows about children's rights – but even people who do don't always respect them."

Rights and relationships

"Sometimes it feels like adults don't get children's rights."

"But there are differences in how we're treated by different people – both adults and children."

"Perhaps our governments should be learning from us and our families!"

2. Alternative care and our rights

Alternative care and abuse

"Alternative care is right for children who are being abused – but not for children who aren't!"

"For some of us, alternative care was where we were abused – not home with our families."

"Even if things are tough at home, alternative care doesn't mean our needs are met."

Balancing our rights is important

"Alternative care might give us some opportunities – but it takes away others."

"Alternative care should be about us – but sometimes it feels like it's just about politics."

Our right to family life

"One of our rights is to family life – and alternative care takes that right away from us."

"Being placed in alternative care can feel like we and our families are being discriminated against."

"Family life gives us access to our identity – alternative care can rob us of that."

"We don't want people to blame our parents – often they did nothing wrong!"

"People say alternative care is about protecting us – but we think it infringes lots of our rights."

Listen to us!

"We are meant to have the right to be heard – but adults often ignore this."

"Going into alternative care takes away the power we have over our own lives."

"Adults think they can protect us – but we need to have a say too, and we don't need heroes!"

3. Families and communities

We lose so much

"Being placed in alternative care has torn our families apart and ruined our relationships."

"Everyone is affected by the decision to put us in alternative care."

Our emotions and our mental health

"Losing our families makes us feel sad, angry, and stigmatised."

"It has an impact on our mental health, and we don't have the people we need to help."

"This shapes who we are and who we will be – it takes away our trust and hope."

We are part of our communities

"Taking us out of our communities harms everyone and harms our culture."

"Communities could be a source of support – but often they are a source of stigma for us."

4. What should be changed?

Don't make things worse

"A basic principle should be that you don't make changes which make things worse for us."

"Short-term solutions can create much bigger problems in the long run!"

"When the system is so broken it is difficult to know what to say."

Keep families together

"More could be done to keep families together rather than tearing them apart in alternative care."

"In our experience the reasons for removing us from our families are not always right."

"And even if alternative care is necessary, let us keep in contact with our family!"

Support families

"If support was given to families, children might not need to be put in alternative care."

"Poverty should never be a reason children go into alternative care – give families money!"

"Helping families stay together should be the priority – alternative care is a last resort."

Listen to children and families

"Children are more capable and thoughtful than adults often think."

"We want you to listen to our families, too – they want what is best for us."

"This is important – it is our lives, and the lives of our families and communities."

And hold decision makers accountable!

"Our families aren't the only people who should be held responsible for their actions."

"It's impossible to get on with our lives if we are scared of what the government will do to us."

"If the government focused on solving big problems, alternative care would not be needed."