

The Importance of Love within the Care System: Love should be a Right

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Abstract

I wrote this piece in the hopes to open a conversation about the impact of love within the care system. As a care experienced person, it often baffles me that we still cannot openly speak about love within the care system. It is the one thing that all children need to thrive yet when they are placed within care, the system is not required to love them, it is not a right and therefore many go without feeling loved when they are in the system. In this piece I have written about my experience of growing up for half my life within the care system and the isolating effect it had on me when I never felt loved, nor was given the chance to feel and understand what real, unconditional love was. I have also highlighted the impact love had on me when aged 17 I felt loved by an adult for the first time in my life in the hopes to highlight the importance love has on ensuring Scotland's care experienced young people are given the best chance at life.

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Growing up in a system for over half my life now has taught me many lessons. Lessons no child should ever have to learn. Lessons no person should ever have to learn.

When I was taken from my parents I was promised protection, I was promised care and I was promised security.

And in a roundabout way this is exactly what I got. I never went hungry, I always had a roof over my head and I was safe from the harms in which I'd previously lived.

The system offered me these things:

- care
- protection
- security

In a practical sense, or in other words a material way, I was provided for.

But the one thing they failed to offer me was the emotional side, emotional security, emotional protection, emotional care — and as such, it's something that I, like all people, have craved in my life.

I quickly learned that I was the only person I could trust or turn to, who would make sure I'm okay.

I quickly learned not to trust relationships, especially not adults, and I quickly learned that no matter how good something appears, it never lasted for very long.

As such, I became a very skeptical child, a child who was untrusting and weary of everything, because I had learned that no matter what, I'd get hurt in some form or another.

I was moved in and out of foster placements without anyone ever asking me what I wanted or needed. I felt isolated and alone, and never got the chance to

deal with any of the trauma I had experienced before and during my time in the system.

In my first foster placement it was made clear to me that I wasn't liked, I was bullied by the other young people and my carer took great pleasure in telling me things that no child should ever hear.

Within months I was in pieces to my social worker, begging him to find me somewhere I'd be wanted.

And he tried.

Soon I was moving again. I felt like I'd been given a second chance.

My second placement was one that I loved and my foster carer tried her best for me, but sadly she wasn't equipped with the skills she needed to care for me, and although I became very attached to her, her family and the life I was building, it became clear to social work that things weren't working.

I still remember the feeling of heartbreak I felt the evening my social worker told me I would be moving.

I was too young to understand the reasons I was being moved and no one ever tried to explain it to me.

It was at this point I learnt the lesson that I should never trust. Not even when things appeared to be really good.

So, I moved on to my third placement, where despite my own best advice I let down my guard, placed trust in the people around me and formed really close relationships with my foster sisters and brothers.

However, this trust was abused, and my placement broke down after five and a half years.

I was forced to leave behind my foster brothers and sisters whom I had watched grow and who equally had grown with me and truthfully, it destroyed me

because they very much were my siblings regardless of the fact we didn't share DNA.

I wasn't allowed to see them or remain in contact with them and still to this day it's something that destroys me. I miss them more than anything and there isn't a day that goes by where I don't think about them.

So again, my things were packed into black bags and plastic carrier bags and I was moved to a temporary foster placement, a week before Christmas.

Those feelings of isolation and mistrust came back with strength and I was left again feeling like I was all alone. A couple of months later I was moved again during my higher exams and placed with my last foster family.

It took well over a year for me to feel comfortable within the house and two and a half years later I was still struggling to feel like I was part of the family.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't relax and I couldn't trust. My carer found this difficult to deal with as she wasn't able to understand why I was guarded. As such her actions only added to my doubts.

Sadly, not too long ago that placement, too, came to an end and now aged 19 I made the decision to leave care because I honestly cannot face anymore distrust and isolation.

But yet again I've had to leave behind my foster siblings whom I absolutely adored and again I'm missing them more than anything.

In this whole time my foster siblings in each placement were the only people who I was able to let love me. They were my rocks and it's destroying me knowing they're not going to be a part of my life. #standupforsiblings

But on reflection, I realise that that four letter word could have changed everything. If the system had offered me love instead of material things it could have been so different for me.

I was 17 before an adult told me they loved me without expectation or condition. 17!

The point I'm making? It's simple: love may be just a four letter word to many, but to us? To children and young people growing up in care, it's everything. It's the one thing that can and does alter a young person's life.

It took 17 years for me to experience unconditional love from a person (they weren't even my foster carer).

And so many other young people face similar situations and often go longer without knowing and believing they are loved and valued.

Knowing I was loved saved my life and gave me strength to fight the trauma I had experienced. Those words offer me comfort and still to this day give me strength in my toughest moments.

It's time we made love a right for all care experienced people.

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About the author

I am 19 and I am a care experienced campaigner and Care Experienced student officer studying social work at Glasgow Caledonian University. I am also an MSYP for Who Cares? Scotland. I spend a huge amount of my time around Who Cares? Scotland attending participation groups, campaigns, gatherings and have helped deliver corporate parenting training to Scotland's corporate Parents.