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Children in the Care System: Family Estrangement through an Occupational Therapy Lens

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The macro, meso and micro context

CAMHS: a fundamental aspect within occupational therapy

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are vital as they provide evidence-based support and interventions for young people encountering emotional, behavioural and mental health challenges. The services can offer a holistic approach to supporting children, young people and their families to develop strategies to cope with the demands of daily life, offer specialist treatment pathways, such as therapy and medication, as well as in-patient care (Padmore, 2016; Hill et al., 2019). Medical approaches via the NHS are only part of the whole picture if provision is to be effective. The full picture of competing challenges impacting the life of the young person is needed.

Social challenges

Family estrangement significantly impacts care-leavers by amplifying existing vulnerabilities and creating additional challenges in their transition to adulthood (Sting and Groinig, 2020). Care-leavers who are already facing a lack of family support may also be estranged from biological relatives, causing isolation and impacting their ability to access resources and emotional support (Lensvelt et al., 2021). This can lead to mental health challenges, social isolation and occupational deprivation which restricts the individual's ability to engage in necessary and meaningful activities (Bryant et al., 2014). The following review of the literature identifies the challenges that looked-after children and care-leavers face, with a particular focus on the Black Caribbean care-leavers' perspective, with insights that go beyond family estrangement, exploring specific and general solutions. The chapter concludes that individuals who have experienced care deserve equal opportunities, a good quality of life and support that continues into adulthood with an emphasis on the further research required to investigate the disparities that Black Caribbean youth with experience of care face to provide adequate solutions for this growing population.

Children in care: a rising population

There are an increasing number of children and young people who are removed from their birth parents and placed into care. Globally, there are approximately 8 million children who live in residential care, which includes orphanages and various institutions, according to Faith Action Initiative. In the United Kingdom, as many as 70 in every 10,000 children are looked after by the local authority, which is an approximate 60% increase from 2001, when there were around 44 out of every 10,000 children in care reported in the University College London (UCL) Children of Care-leavers Policy Briefing. This number is said to rise by the 2030s to more than 100,000 children in care in the United Kingdom, which will put more strain on public funding (BBC, 2021). In England, a large percentage of Black Caribbean children are in care compared to White British children, according to the Nuffield Foundation (2018). The report outlined that 1 in 30 Black Caribbean 16- and 17-year-olds were in care, compared to 1 in 100 White British children in the same age group. This disparity is persistent across different levels of neighbourhood deprivation, and while Black people who have experienced care often refer to themselves as ‘survivors’, many encounter social, emotional, and mental health challenges with anxious, avoidant and disorganized attachment styles due to experiencing significant developmental trauma (Lensvelt et al., 2021). Despite the statistics, there is very little research that explores identity development in this population of care-leavers (Parsons et al., 2024). While many care-leavers embody an innate sense of resilience, the majority experience poor quality of life outcomes, live in chaotic and unacceptable living conditions, lack resources, education and career opportunities, struggle with mental health issues and are at a higher risk of continuing the cycle in their own children (Roberts et al., 2017; Parsons et al., 2024).

Social, emotional and economic disparities

The University College London (UCL) policy briefing (Parsons et al., 2024) had found that young people in care who are out of the system are at a distinct disadvantage compared to non-care-leavers, facing inequalities in education, employment and housing. The study had uncovered that care-leavers are more likely to live in unsatisfactory, damp, living conditions, suffering from domestic violence, experience mental and physical health challenges and are more likely to continue the cycle of their children being taken into care. The literature

highlights that care-leavers are at a higher risk of developing mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, which their children are more likely to inherit, passing on the scars of trauma (Lensvelt et al., 2021; Parsons et al., 2024). The Independent Review of Children's Social Care had called for £2.6 billion in social care funding; however, they were allocated £200 million. The House of Lords Public Service Committee were concerned about the reduced funding amount and reports state that the Parliamentary Education Committee will be investigating the government's reforms. The UK government has made many promises to provide stable homes for care-leavers 'built on love' by developing long-lasting family networks for those who are in care or those who have left the system, and to make love and stable relationships the utmost importance for those who have experienced living in care; and while these promises sound good, many care-leavers, or those who are in care, experience loneliness, isolation, abandonment and estrangement from their biological families and former carers.

Reunification: a debated solution

Findings from youth research has discovered that as young people age out of foster care and transition into independent living, they require family networks to provide security, and there is a common theme between studies that young people benefit from having a safety-net of support which may contribute to developing secure attachments and improved mental health while gaining the tools required to manage responsibilities for independent living (Northway, 2015; Sting and Groinig, 2020; Lensvelt, 2021). Researchers recognize that across the world, the family is identified as the building block for developing secure attachments, maintaining cultural and traditional practices, providing a sense of normality, and is the foundation for discovering identity and belonging (Refaeli, 2017; Thomas et al., 2017; Sting and Groinig, 2020). Most children and young people are in care due to abuse, neglect, abandonment or their parents' inability to care for them (NSPCC, 2025), and while some scholars acknowledge that family attachment is vital for the development of children in care, others argue that re-engagement with birth families may be harmful and an ongoing review is required during the reunification process (Richardson et al., 2017; Farmer, 2018). Despite a higher probability of care-leavers experiencing negative interactions with biological families and birth parents, Sting and Groining (2020) argue that the mother is upheld as a pivotal role in the child's life, despite the parents' inability to care for the child, with the hope that the relationship could improve, and while Stirling (2018) identifies that reunification increases

the risk of homelessness and poor mental health outcomes, there remains an emphasis on the significance of reunification.

Treating the care experience as a protected characteristic

Despite the socio-economic disadvantages care-leavers experience; compared to people who grew up in stable homes with their parents, research has found that more than 27% of care-leavers embody a robust sense of determination and resilience (Lensvelt et al., 2021; UCL, 2024), and many display this tenacity through gaining academic achievements and go on to have successful lives and careers (Sharkness et al., 2010). The UCL policy briefing found that individuals with successful outcomes had stable foster placements and a good support network who supported care-leavers to achieve their goals, gaining higher and further education, good housing and a more positive outlook on their future. In 2023, the Children's Commissioner launched a survey, asking individuals who had been in care to share their views on whether they believed that care experience should be made a protected characteristic. Although the Local Government Association argued that making the care experience a protected characteristic would provide greater authority to policy-makers to develop policies which promote better outcomes for care-leavers, this change was denied under the Equality Act 2010. The Children's Commissioner for England stated that some councils are choosing to treat the care experience as a protected characteristic by considering their needs when making policies and decisions. The UCL policy briefing states that people who have been in care deserve the right to have their care experience reformed as a protected characteristic, to help combat the stigma, discrimination, prejudices and alienation.

Strategies to build a hopeful future

The UCL policy briefing summarized various recommendations to support care-leavers and emphasized the need for the system to act as a 'grandparent'; to provide a safety-net to support their life journey into adulthood and provide suitable housing, education, work and training opportunities. Such recommendations may assist care-leavers with the tools for building tenacity, as the most resilient care-leavers come from secure placements and live in suitable housing conditions in less-deprived areas. Only 5% of these people are in workless households compared to 18% of the population. In 2022, a pilot study in Wales was launched to provide care-leavers with £1,280 to cover their monthly expenditure for 36 months

following their 18th birthday, thus offering some financial security. In addition, in 2021, the Scottish government invested £215 million to help close the poverty gap, and individuals who had been in care were supported with over £11.5 million through the Care Experienced Children and Young People Grant, to ensure that they received adequate support to improve their life and prospects. Researchers argue that the British government should take note of these programmes and the positive impact they could have on care-leavers, by reducing the burden of financial responsibility (UCL, 2024). A Barnardo's (2023) policy report detailed several recommendations to improve the life chances of young people, which included improving the young persons' experience in care by continuing to support them when they leave care, to reduce the risk of behaviours which may lead to imprisonment or homelessness; to deliver culturally sensitive mental health support; for government to develop local protocols for those in the care system to help reduce the over-criminalization of Black youth in the criminal justice system and for the Department of Education, governments and agencies (including those in the criminal justice system, such as police, magistrates and prisons) to educate themselves through attending specialist training and take into account the vulnerabilities and specific needs of Black youth.

Preparing for the future, today

The literature identifies that the number of children and young people in care is rising and while many care-leavers embody an innate sense of resilience, there are a multitude of interconnected challenges stemming from their experiences of trauma, separation, instability, estrangement and the lack of resources, which can significantly impact their mental health and occupational participation. The literature reviewed in the Barnardo's (2023) report defines various problems and offers some solutions, however; further research is required to robustly examine the disparities Black Caribbean care-leavers youth encounter and the challenges experienced when leaving care.

Occupational Gift

Occupation gift: music

The passion for music, singing and performing arts the author of this chapter feels had been inherited from her father, who was a musician and artist. He played the saxophone and keyboards and was an amazing painter. Her strength and determination were inherited from her mother, which had instilled the courage to persevere and succeed despite the odds, where

statistically, 14% of care-leavers go into further education compared to 47% of young people who did not grow up in care (Young and Lilley, 2023).

As a clinician, the author believes that taking care of your psychical and mental health is vital in being able to assist others with adequate care. Occupations that I enjoy that support my well-being are singing in a gospel choir with a community of African and Caribbean gospel singers who praise and worship God and attending Christian-led acting classes. My faith in God is the central tread that encourages me and provides hope for a content and fulfilled future.

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