

Research

  
Children's Workforce  
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The relationships and supports that matter to  
children looked after (CLA) in long term voluntary  
accommodation (Children Act 1989, s 20)

PLR0910/049

The relationships and supports that matter to children looked after (CLA) in long term voluntary accommodation (Children Act 1989, s. 20)

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The reports were completed between September 2009 and February 2010 and apply a wide range of research methodologies. They are not intended to be longitudinal research reports but they provide a snapshot of the views and opinions of the groups consulted as part of the studies. As these projects were time limited, the evidence base can be used to inform planning but should not be generalised across the wider population.

These reports reflect the views of the practitioners that undertook the research. The views and opinions of the authors should not be taken as representative of CWDC.

A new UK Government took office on 11 May. As a result the content in this report may not reflect current Government policy.

## **Abstract**

The overall aim of this practitioner-led research project was to explore relationships and conceptualisations of 'permanence in foster care' from the young person's perspective. A multidimensional conceptualisation of permanence, with a focus on supportive networks, was used to identify the relationships that a group of looked after young people viewed as significant to them and to explore which relationship groups they accessed for social support.

Participants were a convenience sample of six (two male, four female) young people (aged 13 – 16) who were voluntarily accommodated (Children Act 1989, s.20) in the long term care of the local authority. Four participants were living with foster carers and two were in residential homes.

Participants constructed a personal network map, placing themselves at the centre of a concentric circles diagram and the names of the people in their support network in the surrounding circles. To ascertain participants' perceptions of who provides what type of support, they were asked how they would respond in three scenarios that were designed to elicit specific measures of social support (affective support, self-affirmation, and instrumental assistance).

The results showed that the young people considered a wide variety of relationships as important to them and were able to utilise a range of relationships as sources of social support. Significantly, despite their physical absence, sibling relationships were unanimously viewed as important and appeared to hold the potential to provide much support.

This research suggests the potential value in moving beyond physical conceptualisations of permanence and instead adopting a systemic relationships-based approach, which recognises a young person's entire social network. Recommendations for practice include providing support to strengthen all significant relationships, regardless of their physical presence.

This research project hopes to highlight the potentially unique needs of voluntarily accommodated young people. The discussion suggests the importance of reinforcing the implementation of voluntary accommodation as it was intended, as "support for children and families" (Children Act 1989, part 3).

## **Aims of the project**

The overall aim of this practitioner-led research project is to explore relationships and conceptualisations of 'permanence in foster care' from the young person's perspective.

A multidimensional conceptualisation of permanence, with a focus on supportive networks, is used to identify the relationships that a group of looked after young people view as significant to them and to explore which relationship groups they accessed for social support.

A related aim is to highlight the dearth of current knowledge regarding the potentially unique needs of long-term voluntarily accommodated children and young people.

## **Context**

Children looked after (CLA) refers to children (aged 0-18) who are accommodated by the local authority either via a care order (Children Act 1989, s.31) or through a voluntary agreement with their parent(s) (s.20). At any one time around 61,000 children (approximately 0.5% of the total children's population) are accommodated in England (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2009).

For these children, the local authority has the onerous task of being their 'corporate parent' (Department of Health [DH], 1998). That is, the local authority inherits a legal and moral duty to provide the level of care and support that would be expected of a responsible parent (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006). It is therefore suggested that children who are accommodated in the long term care of the local authority, and for whom no return home is envisaged (a cohort of children whom at any one time account for approximately 30% of the CLA population: DCSF, 2009), are arguably some of our most vulnerable in society. They are the children who are the most reliant on the capabilities of their corporate parent, and thus the social workers who are employed to fulfil this role.

In terms of effectively fulfilling this parenting role, there is a national drive to increase the quality and stability of placements. This was a key message in Care Matters: Time for Change (DCSF, 2007), and the aims of this White Paper are being implemented through legislation and guidance, most recently in the provisions afforded by the Children and Young Persons Act, 2008. Such an emphasis on improving placement stability can also be seen in social work practice within the local authority in which this study is based. For over recent years, fostering standards have becoming increasingly aligned with adoption standards. For instance, long term placements now need to be prepared for, matched and celebrated using the same procedures as those used for adoption.

This emphasis on placement stability and security has led to heavy investment in the "key potential resource (of) the carers themselves" (Sinclair et al., 2005, p.264). In particular through interventions designed to increase the efficacy of foster carers, such as the development of the secure base parenting model (Schofield & Beek, 2009), which has formed part of the revised training programme produced by the Fostering Network.

The rationale behind the heavy governmental investment can be traced back to the key objective of Quality Protects (DH, 1998) - of ensuring that "children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care for the duration of childhood". The

corresponding dominance of a particular interpretation of attachment theory<sup>1</sup> can be seen in the underlying premise is that children who cannot live with their birth families need a consistent, long term substitute family in order to build secure attachments, which are viewed as essential for healthy development. Thus the favoured conceptualisation of 'permanence in foster care' would appear to be one-dimensional in nature, with a focus on the physical presence of one stable family base.

While such ideals are clearly laudable, it could be that aspirations of long term foster care as creating a secure and stable base may not be realistic. For, as research has consistently illustrated, while foster care is at times capable of providing this security, it rarely achieves it (Sinclair et al., 2005, 2007; Schofield et al., 2007). It is therefore disappointing that, despite such studies helpfully illustrating the complex and multiple difficulties in providing stability in foster care, their conclusions and the corresponding aims of policy and practice, appear to remain focused on methods designed to promote foster care as an alternate family base. This has perhaps resulted in a missed the opportunity to consider other potentially significant factors.

Alternatively, research outside of fostering, such as with divorced families, indicates that children are capable of managing, and do indeed benefit from, multiple relationships with a range of significant adults (e.g. Trinder, Beek & Connolly, 2002). The importance of supporting CLA to form a healthy dual identity (which recognises the role of the birth and the foster family) has at least been recognised by fostering research. However, the problematic caveat of this is that a secure and stable base, provided by the foster family, is proposed as an essential prerequisite in order for CLA to successfully manage this (Schofield & Beek, 2005). As such, it has been suggested that minimising parental interference and reducing parental involvement is necessary to allow CLA to 'move on' from their birth families; a process that is seen as necessary to enhance placement security and stability (Sinclair et al., 2005, p.259).

As an alternative to this emphasis on the secure primary care-giver, within the USA, as well as elsewhere in Europe, there is increasing support for a multidimensional conceptualisation of permanence, which recognises the importance of multiple relationships for the formation of a supportive social network. Social networks are viewed as dynamic hierarchic structures, whereby different relationships fulfil diverse supportive functions (Antonucci, 1986). Effective access to social support has been shown to be significant for identity formation (Levitt, 2005) and emotional health and wellbeing (Levitt et al., 1993), as well as for the development of effective coping strategies (Sheppard, 2009).

Within the USA, this social convoy model has been proposed as capturing the complexity and fluidity of relationships for CLA across the lifespan. This social convoy model suggests that in the absence of physical and legal permanence, young people often strive to create a self-defined relationship-based model of permanence (Samuels, 2008). It is suggested that for CLA, relationships with birth family members continue to hold significance, despite their physical absence, both during and after accommodation (Samuels, 2009). Indeed, the fierce loyalty felt by many of the young people in this study towards their biological families prevented them from 'buying into' their foster and adoptive placements. As such, it would seem important to recognise the dynamic and reciprocal impact of the birth and foster family, as well as other self-defined relationships on young people's conceptualisations of permanence.

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<sup>1</sup> Attachment theory, as outlined by Bowlby (1988) and empirically extended by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978), views the development of a secure attachment to a primary caregiver as a salient developmental task, which is essential for healthy child development, as well as having considerable impact throughout the lifespan.

This research project aims to test the helpfulness of this multidimensional understanding of permanence in terms of capacity to access social supports. It explores whether, as a social convoy model would suggest, CLA view multiple relationships as significant and consequentially utilise a range of people to successfully access social support. The results could make helpful suggestions as to how to most effectively support CLA to develop a 'sense of permanence' and to enhance their capacity to access social support.

The focus of this research project is on children and young people who are long term voluntarily accommodated (Children Act 1989, s.20). This population was chosen as they represent a group for whom isolation of the foster family as the stable and secure base seems especially unhelpful. For the birth parents of these children retain full parental responsibility for them, and therefore continue to play a significant role in their lives, despite their long term physical separation.

While many studies into permanence in long term foster care have included these children among their participants, legal status has yet to be fully explored as a potential variable. Thus in focusing on these children, this research project has the additional possibility of bringing attention to the potentially unique needs of this group, who at any one time account for approximately a third of the long term children looked after population (DCSF, 2009), but whose characteristics have not attracted appropriate research attention to date.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

Participants were a convenience sample of six (two male, four female) young people (aged 13 – 16) who were voluntarily accommodated (Children Act 1989, s 20) in the long term care of the local authority.

Participants had been looked after continuously for two years or longer and had been in their current placement for 12 months or more. While the original selection criteria included being in placement for at least two years (as is a government-endorsed measure of stability (D35 measure: Social Services Performance Assessment Framework (DH, 2003))), this proved too limiting. Consistent with recent research into children looked after generally (e.g. Schofield et al., 2007), it became apparent that very few voluntarily accommodated children had achieved this stability ideal and thus the selection criteria were widened.

Four participants were living with foster carers and two were in residential homes. Prior to their current placement, participants had moved between two and nine times. All participants had experienced abuse and/or neglect in their birth families, and all but one had previously been subject to a child protection plan.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was gained from the interim local authority ethics committee, as well as from the children looked after team managers and the service manager.

To ensure that participants gave informed consent, young people were only invited to participate if they fulfilled specific criteria:

- identified by their social worker as likely to enjoy taking part

- described by their social worker as 'Gillick competent' and therefore capable of self-consenting (see appendix 1)
- young people with whom the researcher had no previous involvement.

Participants signed a consent form agreeing to participate, and advised they were free to withdraw at any time, without explanation. Their competence at withdrawing consent was established via role plays. Participants decided how much information they shared and were given the opportunity to withdraw any of the finished 'data'. All of the young people who were contacted agreed to take part and participated fully. One participant withdrew two comments.

Participant's parents and carers were notified of the invitation to take part and given the opportunity to object to them to being contacted, although none did. However, it quickly became apparent that there was a need to be especially explicit with carers about the purposes and scope of the research project. For when making the initial contact a number of carers commented on the need for relationship and life story work to be undertaken with the young people. While the constraints of the research project were clearly conveyed to carers, their comments were nonetheless passed on to the young people's social workers, for them to follow up.

Given the potentially emotive subject area, it was important to reduce the potential for the research to cause mental distress. Safeguards included ensuring that participant's carers and social workers were fully informed about the research and able to offer emotional support. In addition, participants were only contacted if they were in a 'relatively stable' placement, as defined by their social worker. However, two of the young people who had been such described at the point of contact, went on to experience placement disruption after the invitation letters had been sent out (one placement broke down, while another became very fragile). For these young people, the invitations were not followed through. The young people equally made no attempt to contact the researcher.

No personal data was recorded as participants chose a pseudonym for themselves and each of their family members, which they used throughout. The results are therefore discussed using these pseudonyms.

## **Interviews**

At the participant's request, all interviews took place in their homes and lasted approximately one hour. One young person requested that their foster carer remain with them during the interview. The rest were interviewed alone.

Based on an adaptation from the children's convoy mapping procedure (Levitt, Guacci-Franco & Levitt, 1993), participants were asked to construct a personal network map, placing themselves at the centre of a concentric circles diagram and the names of the people in their support network in the surrounding circles:

- Inner: "These are the people who you are most close to. These people are very important to you. It's hard to imagine life without them"
- Middle: "These are the people who you do not feel quite as close to, but they are still important to you"
- Outer: "These are the people who you are not especially close to, but they are still important enough to be on your network map"

Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their key figures and, with their permission, any significant information was recorded.

To ascertain participants' perceptions of who provides what type of support, they were asked how they would respond in three specific scenarios. These were intended to elicit the domains specified in the convoy model (affective support, self-affirmation, and instrumental assistance). The scenarios were based on direct questions that have been shown to be effective with adults (Levitt, et al., 1993), and have been adapted for use with adolescents based on the types of questions that are commonly used by the researcher in life story work:

- Affective support: "You are ill in hospital. Who comes to visit you? Who makes you feel better?"
- Self-affirmation: "It is your birthday. You are having a party. Who will you invite? Who will you have fun with?"
- Instrumental assistance: "You have a difficult piece of course work to do. Who do you ask for help with this?"

Again, participants were encouraged to elaborate and explain their answers, which were recorded.

Participants were provided with verbal and written feedback and given the opportunity to provide any additional information and ask questions.

## **Findings**

### **What relationships did the young people view as significant?**

#### **Birth parents**

There was a clear divide between young people in the perceived importance of their birth parents. While all young people included all of their known parents (three young people were unaware of their fathers and one young person included a step-father) on their network map, half placed them in the inner circle, while the other half placed them in the outer circle.

The young people who placed birth parents in their inner circle found it difficult to justify this and their reasons largely focused on relationship status. For instance, Shane had never met his father, but had recently made contact through a social networking site: "he's my dad- end of".

In contrast, young people who placed their birth parents in the outer circle were more elaborative in their justifications, which often illustrated their complex and divided feelings: "She kind of has to be.... she's my mum... but we're not close cos we don't see each other ... but she's still important to me" (Keller).

However, despite stating their lack of importance, for these young people, their birth parents remained a significant topic of conversation throughout the interviews. For instance, Nicola was very keen to explain her feelings about her mother: "she's just so mean. She says one thing then does another. I just don't understand why she's so mean". Such is indicative of the complex and ambivalent feelings that appeared to be felt by many of the young people, which they may not have not been effectively supported to manage.

#### **Birth siblings**

The young people had between two and six siblings, but none were presently living with them. Despite this, they all included at least one sibling in their inner circle. Reasons included shared history: "he gets me. He's been through it. He's the only one that knows what's happened" (Shane), personal characteristics: "she's supportive and caring" (Mia) and roles: "she's the



person I turn to" (Keller), including reciprocal roles: "I'd kick anyone's ass who tried to hurt him. I'll always look out for him" (Mark).

However, as was common to many relationship groups and for many of the young people; sibling relationships did not have to be wholly (or even largely) positive for them to nonetheless be significant. What was concerning, however, was that, as with their relationships with their birth parents, the young people often felt largely alone in managing the difficulties and complexities of their relationships: "I love all my brothers and sister but my brother's changed. He talks all Northern and looks like my dad. And my sister's an idiot. She reckons she's black. Yeah her carer is, but she aint. She should talk like me. We fight all the time so I don't wanna see her again but (assistant social worker) says its normal so I guess I just gotta deal with it" (Nicola, who placed her six siblings in her inner and middle circles).

### **Extended birth family**

Grandparents, aunts and cousins held varying significance for young people, though their importance was restricted to the outer and middle circles. For Lola, her Nan elicited the most affectionate response that she gave: "I love my Nan. She means so much to me", whereas Mark (who seemed to have a close extended family, but towards whom he held much ambivalence) described a rivalry-filled relationship with his cousin that appeared very similar to his relationship with some of his siblings: "he can be so nasty but Nan favours him" (cousin) "He's definitely the favourite" (brother). As previously mentioned, many of the young people held strongly ambivalent views about many of their relationships.

### **Foster carers**

All of the young people in foster care placed at least one of their carers in their inner circle. The young people generally talked very affectionately about their foster carers, such as Nicola, who has been in her present placement for 12 months: "she's like a proper mum to me. I couldn't imagine not living here". Other justifications focused more on the roles that foster carers fulfilled: "they take good care of me" (Mark).

Of the two young people living in residential care, Shane placed staff members within his middle and outer circle: "I chat to him bout all kinds of stuff. We have a laugh", while Lola only placed staff members in her outer circle.

### **Foster siblings**

Foster siblings played a significant role for many young people, and they elicited much affection, such as for Mia, whose foster sibling would shortly be returning to his birth family, and with whom she would have no further contact: "he's important to me and I'll miss him when he goes". Foster siblings also appeared to fulfil important roles, such as for Mark: "I ask her advice all the time. I can chat to her about anything".

### **Extended foster family members**

For many of the young people in foster care, foster grandparents, aunts and cousins appeared to hold similar significance and fulfil similar roles to extended birth relatives: "I treat him like a grandad" (Mia).

### **Previous foster carers**

Four of the young people placed previous foster carers on their network map, and spoke very affectionately about them, even when the placement appeared to have broken down suddenly and negatively. Nicola, who placed her current foster carers in her inner circle, placed her

previous foster carers in the middle (the male carer, who she called grandad) and outer circles (the female carer, who she called Nan): “Grandad. He’s funny and cool. I always liked him. I chat to him on facebook and MSN.... Nan. We get on better now we don’t live together. I see her in town sometimes and we chat. She was just too protective of me. Wanted to mummy me”.

### **Professionals**

All but one young person named one, two or three professionals in their middle and outer circles. Professionals who were placed on young people’s network maps included three social workers, an assistant social worker, two teachers, two youth workers and a contact supervisor. “He’s always stood by me and if I’m in a bad mood he cheers me up” (Shane, about a youth worker).

Four of the young people spoke about the importance of supportive professionals who knew their story: “she’s always been there for me. Through everything. She knows everything that’s going on... I don’t tell my friends everything” (Keller, about her teacher).

Two of the young people spoke about their frustration at transient social workers, but for one young person, Shane, this impermanence appeared to be offset somewhat by a consistent contact supervisor: “I know she’s always looking out for me”.

### **Friends**

All of the young people included a “best friend” in their inner or middle circles.

“I’ve known him all my life, so he knows EVERYTHING. He’s amazing. Proper supportive” (Lola). Four young people also differentiated between the significance of different friends: “I don’t tell my other friends everything, but they’re still important to me. They’re really good people to hang around with” (Keller).

### **Pets**

One young person included her foster carer’s pet dog in her inner circle and the horse that she rides in her middle circle. The potential benefits of pet ownership for CLA has yet to be fully explored in the research literature. This may be an interesting future direction for practitioner-led research.

## **Who provides what type of support?**

### **Affective support**

The young people selected a range of people who they would want to visit them in hospital. All of the young people quickly selected at least one birth sibling and at least one parental figure (either birth parent or foster carer). Young people’s justifications for their choices suggested the importance these people in providing affective support: “I’d want her there at a time like that. I’d need her” (Lola, about her birth mother) “she looks after me when I’m hurt” (Nicola, talking about her female foster carer) “my brother 100%” (Shane).

For the young people in foster care, all of their initial selections were from their inner circle. Thus, consistent with their network maps, two young people quickly invited their foster carer(s) (inner circle), as well as their birth parents (inner), while two young people included only their foster carer(s) (inner) but not their birth parents (outer).

However, for the two young people in residential care, their answers were slightly different to what would be expected from their network maps. Shane (who placed members of the

residential staff in his middle and outer circles and his parents in his inner circle) first named a member of staff: "I reckon Bobs would take me and he'd stay with me too", then later added his mother and step-father. Whereas Lola (who placed her mother in her outer circle) took slightly longer to answer, before deciding that she would "want" and "need" her mother there.

Extended birth family members and friends were often included later, as an apparent afterthought, and were usually included for their role in boosting the young person's morale: "she'd make me feel good, happy" (Lola, about her Nan).

### **Self-affirmation**

All of the young people were able to identify a range of people who they would invite to their party. However, the way in which they answered this question varied greatly.

Three of the young people who were living in foster care quickly decided that that they would invite all, or at least some, of the people named in their inner circle: "my sister, definitely. We'd have loads a fun" (Keller). They then spent considerably longer identifying and deliberating over further people, which included a mix of those from the middle and outer circles: "my party would be full of old people.... so I'd invite my other friends but I wouldn't have fun with them" (Me).

Nicola struggled with this question and felt strongly ambivalent views about whether she would invite her birth family: "Well the little ones couldn't come (Nicola's four younger siblings have been adopted, and she has no direct contact with them), so I wouldn't invite mum or dad either....it'd be nice if my mum and dad were there, especially if it was big, like my 16<sup>th</sup>". This seemed to affect her ability to consider other possible guests, and she looked to her foster carer for advice in answering this question.

The two young people in residential care appeared to answer the question with ease, and quickly identified a range of guests. This included residential staff (classed as foster carers) and other residents (foster siblings) who had not been named on their network maps: "I'd have to invite Bunny. He'd get upset if I didn't. I guess he's alright really. I might even put him on my map" (Shane, although he later decided not to). For Lola, while she was able to easily identify people who she would invite, she felt it equally important to justify why her birth mother would not be invited: "she doesn't deserve to come".

### **Instrumental assistance**

Three young people cited teachers or educational support workers as people from whom they would seek support with course work. For two young people these workers were previously named in their middle and outer circles and they quickly selected them. For Shane, however, it was a worker who was not named on his network map. After thinking about the question for some time, Shane explained his answer: "I don't get homework and if I did I wouldn't do it. But if I wanted help I'd go to Sir. He's alright and always up for helping. I can ask his advice on stuff; on loads of stuff actually".

Two young people selected a sibling from their inner circle: "she's so clever and I know she'll always help me" (Keller, about her sister). Nicola was initially very unsure, then chose her foster carer, who was also named in her inner circle: "she helps me with stuff".

## **Conclusion and discussion**

### **Relationships Matter**

The overwhelming message that was consistently portrayed throughout the interviews was that the young people considered a wide variety of relationships as important to them. The surprise inclusion of previous foster carers as significant figures is particularly noteworthy and the potential role of pet ownership for CLA may equally warrant further exploration.

Most significantly, sibling relationships were unanimously viewed as important and they appeared to hold the potential to provide much support to the young people. Interestingly, the young people interviewed did not appear to perceive physical boundaries as constraints to their relationships and did not see the fact that they did not live with their siblings as restricting the support that they could provide. Unfortunately, sibling relationships for CLA are distinctly under-researched, with the limited available research looking at decisions regarding sibling co-placement versus separation, with a heavy focus on adoption. It is important to recognise this lack of knowledge regarding the potential value of sibling relationships and the corresponding dearth of knowledge regarding methods to most effectively support sibling relationships when co-placement is not possible.

### **The potential value of a multidimensional, relationship-based conceptualisation of permanence**

By moving beyond physical and legal definitions, and by instead extending conceptualisations of permanence to include its relational aspect, a more systemic, holistic approach emerges, which recognises the young person's entire social network. Accordingly, a model of permanence which acknowledges the ongoing significance of birth family members is suggested.

Indeed, the clear divide between the young people in the perceived importance of their parents should be recognised. For while it would appear that some of the young people were able to successfully manage their dual identities, many were not. Exploration of the possible reasons behind these differences, and the potential for social work practice to improve this, could be an important aim of future research.

### **The need to support relationships, including when physically absent**

It was previously suggested that the current focus of social work policy and practice would appear to be on strengthening the foster carer relationship. Given the complexities and difficulties of some of the young people's relationships, it would seem important to recognise the dynamic and reciprocal impact of the birth and foster family, as well as other self-defined relationships. In this respect, an exclusive focus on strengthening and stabilising only one of these relationship systems would clearly not be as beneficial as a systemic approach to strengthening the young person's entire social network. Given the inherent instability of foster care, an approach of this type is especially welcome.

For, if voluntary accommodation is to be implemented as intended, as "support for children and families" (Children Act 1989, part 3) then this should include supporting and facilitating relationships with birth family members, even when a physical return home is not an option. So social workers should be encouraged to work more closely with parents in order to truly embrace the idea of shared parental responsibility. However, such an approach does represent a significant change of emphasis from current local authority practice, where parental support generally ceases on accommodation, unless reunification is an imminent aim. Therefore future

social work research may do well to further explore the social work skills and methods needed to facilitate close working with parents (Forrester et al., 2008).

While the comments of the young people and their carers would indeed suggest that they were receiving little effective support in managing their complex and often difficult relationships, it would be helpful for future research to explore this further, and to look at the possible reasons for this. Research like this could make helpful suggestions as to how social work practice needs to develop to effectively support young people with such difficulties. For instance, there would appear to be a knowledge gap regarding the factors that influence the success and value of contact for children and young people in long term foster care.

Equally, many of the young people spoke of social networking sites and e-communication as enhancing their relationships. However, these new methods of unsupervised contact equally hold the potential to cause great disruption, which social workers need to be aware of. By recognising the continued strength of relationships, despite physical separation, practitioners (as well as researchers) would be empowered to find ways of appropriately supporting these relationships in the face of evolving methods of communication.

### **The need to expand research to look at the potentially unique needs of long-term voluntarily accommodated children and young people (Children Act 1989, s 20)**

While this research project has not been comparative and cannot make any assumptions as to the impact of legal status, by focusing on voluntarily accommodated CLA it hopes to bring attention to the potentially unique needs of this group of young people, whose characteristics have not attracted appropriate research attention to date.

A future research focus of this type may be particularly interesting, given the apparent government emphasis on the importance of dispute resolution away from the court arena. Such an emphasis can be seen in recent documentation such as Public Law Outline (Ministry of Justice, 2008), which is based (at least partly) on the ethos that care orders should be avoided where possible, as well as the Children Act Guidance and Regulations (DSCF, 2008), which reinforces the promotion of the 'no order' principle enshrined in the original Act. Given that this legislation was implemented alongside increased fees for care proceedings, it seems entirely possible that there could be an increase in the population of long term voluntarily accommodated CLA (Broadhurst & Holt, 2010). In light of this potential, it is essential that an appropriate knowledge base is developed to address it.

### **The potential efficacy of practitioner-led research**

Developed from methods used in life story work, the network mapping procedure and the use of scenarios in this research appeared to be effective in providing a medium through which the young people could safely and effectively share their views and experiences. There is a need to continue to develop child-focused and enabling research methods that are nonetheless ethically valid and sensitive to the complexities and often difficult experiences of CLA. Practitioner-led research offers one method of facilitating this. The willingness of the young people to participate and the unique insights gathered from the interviews suggests that there is much to be gained from developing this style of research.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Information provided to social workers to allow them to ascertain whether the young person is competent (given along with entire methodology above)**

Gillick v West Norfolk Area Health Authority [1986] AC 112 HL.

Under the 'Gillick competence' ruling it was decided that, provided a child has sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him to understand fully what is proposed, they may give their consent.

Note that 'Gillick competence' relates to the particular child and the particular situation, so their emotional and developmental needs should be considered after fully taking into account the complete methodology, including the consent form, and the young person's ability to understand this.

Informed consent is considered an ongoing process and all young people must be competent to withdraw at any time that they choose. Therefore, you should consider whether the young person is likely to feel any subtle pressures from anyone (researcher, social worker, carer), in light of the proposed methodology, which would prevent them from expressing a desire to withdraw. If you do not feel that they would feel able to do this, then they are not considered competent.



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